THE OLD INDISPENSABLES

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE QUEEN OF CHINA AND OTHER POEMS

Second Impression

THE OLD INDISPENSABLES

A ROMANCE OF WHITEHALL

BY EDWARD SHANKS

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TO

J. C. SQUIRE

THE PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

The Rt. Hon. Henry Smith, M.P.	*His Majesty's Secretary of State for Circumlocutory Affairs.*
Arthur Mullins, M.P.	*Parliamentary Under-Secretary at the Circumlocution Office.*
Sir James Bootle, K.C.B.	*Permanent Under-Secretary.*
Mr. William Blood, M.V.O.	*Director of Circumvention in the Circumlocution Office.*
Mr. Thomas Burnet	*Assistant Director of Circumvention.*
Mr. Frederick Pyeblew Mr. William Harper	*Members of the Higher Division employed in the Circumvention Branch.*
Mr. George Evans Mr. Edwin Roker	*Members of the Second Division employed in the same.*
Cyril Hammond	*Temporary Assistant employed in the same.*
Mr. Henry Wilson, I.S.O. Mr. Paul Johnson Mr. Clarence Bulge	*Private Secretaries to the Director of Circumvention.*
Mr. James Runter, C.B.	*Financial Adviser in the Circumlocution Office.*
Mr. Augustus Hoskins, C.M.G.	*Director of Establishment in the same.*
Mr. Ernest Tupper, M.V.O.	*Director of Delays and Evasions in the same.*
Mr. Towle Mr. Minns Mr. Cuxper Mr. Whale Mr. Badger Mr. Polperro	*Members of the Towle Committee of Enquiry into the Organisation of the Circumlocution Office.*
Algernon Percy Hereward	*Private Secretaries to the Secretary of State.*

Miss Joan Mainwaring	*A temporary woman clerk employed in the Circumvention Branch.*
Daphne Phyllis	*A temporary girl clerk employed in the same.*

Note.—Certain of the incidents in this book are founded on incidents which actually occurred, but no attempt has been made, or, I hope, will be suspected, at the portraiture of real persons.

E. S.

I

It was comparatively early in the war that the Circumvention Branch of the Circumlocution Office outgrew its limited accommodation and was obliged to move. It happened, in fact, before the Office of Works had discovered the enchanting possibilities of the great hotels. Some time had still to elapse before the heads of newly created branches were to sit in magnificent banqueting halls and thence to issue their orders to clerks working amid the terrifying wall-papers of the top-floor bedrooms. (It did once happen that a potentate detected in himself the symptoms of incipient agoraphobia and removed to a bedroom, installing his typist in the banqueting-room in his stead. But that belongs to another chapter of our rough island story.) Not yet, at the time of which I write, was the civilian visitor, withdrawing from the presence of the minor omnipotent who had refused him a permit for the release of shampooing oil, abashed and perplexed by the sight of an unobtrusive cupboard enigmatically labelled with the word BOOTS. The ideas of the Office of Works were still pedestrian and narrow in their range. It was imagined that for official purposes an office was desirable.

But the needs of the Circumvention Branch were growing acute. It had been little more than a matter for jesting when four boy clerks were sent to join a room which had previously been thought overcrowded by two Second Division clerks and their five temporary assistants. It caused no inconvenience at all when all the occupants of this room, now swelled to a total number of twenty-three, were driven into the corridor to make room for four hopeless failures of superior rank whom the Derogation of Crown Appanages Office had cheerfully lent to assist the Circumvention Branch in its labours. It is true that some remark was occasioned when a Higher Division clerk (albeit a very little one, like the souls of the penguins) was also turned out of his room. But they put him at a corner, a distinguished though draughty position, arranged a screen round him and gave him a shorthand typist who could not spell and of whom he was desperately afraid. Thus the claims of caste were satisfied.

The crisis came at last quite suddenly. His Majesty's Secretary of State for Circumlocutory Affairs felt himself growing a little stale and departed from his rule of ceasing work only to sleep and waking only to resume his labours. The first battle of Ypres had been brought to a successful conclusion, and he felt that he owed himself a little relaxation. Besides, he had been outwitted the day before by a contractor, and the day before that by a colleague. He attributed these misfortunes to the result of overwork. So when he was walking from his office to the House and met on the way a polished female friend who invited him to dinner for that night, he felt that for once at least in this way he could best serve the State. The consequences of his overwork must indeed have been serious for him to have missed a certain gleam of purpose in the lady's eye.

He woke the next morning with an uneasy feeling that something regrettable had occurred overnight; and this feeling gradually focussed itself into the disagreeable consciousness that he had acquired three new private secretaries. He had; and their names were Algernon, Percy and Hereward. They were at present running a Free Thought Mission to the soldiers billeted in the neighbourhood of Piccadilly; but the work, though their hearts were in it, was growing to be a strain on their delicate nervous organisations. Moreover, their temperamental unfitness for military service (he had been, he remembered with pride, severely exigent on this point) was amply proved by the fact that already, before the end of 1914, the idea of conscription was beginning to interfere with their sleep.

. . . How it all came back to him! But, as his mind struggled through successive veils of stupidity back to consciousness, he found it a little hard to understand why this affair should make him so profoundly uneasy. He had two private secretaries already, one the Parliamentary man and another a Civil Servant lately from Oxford. But there was a Second Division man who acted as clerk and was quite capable; and, if he could keep the work going with the two superiors he had already, there seemed no reason why three more should throw him out of his stride. It was true that the salaries which had been stipulated were a trifle stiff; but what mattered a few hundred pounds more or less when England had vowed her last penny to the liberation of Belgium? The Secretary of State could not imagine why he should feel uneasy; but still, there it was, there was no getting over it, he *did* feel uneasy.

Light came to him as he was putting on his gloves.

The question of room ! Algernon, Percy and Hereward had been brought up together (at home), they had never been separated, their fraternal devotion was a thing affecting to witness. And the Secretary of State, at one moment of the preceding evening, had been so anxious to obtain their services that he had promised blindly, with vehement asseverations, to do anything their mother thought necessary to be done for their comfort. He looked back on some of these promises now with regret. Was it really obligatory on him, since he had given his word, to arrange for Algernon, Percy and Hereward to be supplied with biscuits and milk at eleven in the morning and personally to see to it that they drank *all* the milk ? But this was a negligible matter compared with other promises he had given. He had assured their mother that they should all sit together in a nice room close to his own, with no strangers in it to alarm their nervousness. He had agreed with her that the right way to get the best out of them was to coax them.

He reflected on this unlucky promise as he walked to his office (for he believed in a little healthy exercise) and turned it this way and that in his mind. It would have been easy enough to have stowed the brothers away one by one in different rooms ; and then he need never have seen them again. But that solution was impossible. There was old Bootle's room, of course. But old Bootle, the Permanent Under-Secretary, had been in that room for so long and had grown so intimate with, and so attached to, the pigeons which walked along his window-ledge that it was doubtful whether he could survive any change. He was an old and failing man as it was. Then there was Runter. But Runter was the only man who understood the Estimates, except a certain Radical member who had married the aunt of the Secretary of State and had family grudges against him. The Secretary of State fancied that he had observed a dangerous spirit in Runter once or twice already. The more he thought about the situation, the more troublesome it seemed.

I trust that the reader has not imagined that the Secretary of State (whose name, by the way, was Smith) or Bootle or Runter or even one chosen among the three brothers, Algernon, Percy and Hereward, will be the hero of this story. We have by now outgrown, I hope, the convention of a personal hero. The protagonist in the chronicle I am now writing will be that spirit of self-sacrifice and devotion to the public good which characterises the Civil Service, and this spirit will be embodied now in one person, now in another, as the needs of exposition demand. But all these persons contributed, Smith by his kindness of heart, Bootle by his pathetic affection for the pigeons, Runter by his monopoly of knowledge and dangerous spirit, and the three brothers by their mere existence, to the first crisis of the tale. Smith consulted his secretary, who consulted the Second Division man, who decided, in Napoleonic fashion, that the Circumvention Branch must suffer.

It was therefore conveyed to the Director of Circumvention with all possible speed, that he and the Assistant Director must share a room between them. (The message, which of course had to pass through the channels laid down in the Manual of Procedure, took about five days to reach the Director; but such was the celerity practised in the Circumlocution Office that nowhere in its passage was it delayed for more than six hours. Algernon, Percy and Hereward meanwhile rested from their spiritual exertions and prepared themselves for fresh endeavours.) When it reached the Director of Circumvention, he smiled urbanely on the Deputy Assistant Director of Establishment from whose mouth it came, stroked his close-clipped fair moustache, and observed that he would give the matter his full attention. He was a newcomer from another Department, and though those around him were a little afraid of him they were also exceedingly sorry for him. They knew the office he was in; and he had yet to learn what he was up against. The news was then carried to the Assistant Director. He grunted twice with a descending interval and remarked that he was busy. But when the bearer of ill tidings, the tragic messenger, had departed, he sought the Director with a proposal.

II

THE Director's room would certainly have suited Algernon, Percy and Hereward to admiration. It was large, it was airy, it was beautifully furnished. A huge table stood in the middle, dwarfed by the vast expanse which surrounded it. On the table stood a telephone, a blotting-pad, an ink-stand, a pen and a box of Egyptian cigarettes. Opposite the seat of the Director's labours there was a book-case containing complete sets of the works of Mr. E. Phillips Oppenheim and Mr. Robert W. Chambers. The Director was content that you should think his tastes in literature both commonplace and frivolous. It also contained a presentation copy of Lord Morley's great work on compromise, gratefully given to him by the South-Eastern Amalgamated Society of Fish Friers as a remembrance of the services he had rendered them, when holding another official position, in connection with a labour dispute. Into this abode of elegant efficiency the Assistant Director penetrated with a scowl.

"Can I have a word with you, Blood?" he muttered tersely. (I can no longer disguise the fact that the Director's name was Blood; but he was known to his more intimate enemies, and to quite a number of the clerks in his branch, as Soapy Sam.)

"Yes, Burnet. Won't you come in and sit down?" he replied, more blandly than his colleague and with the charm of expression and gesture which—together with the singularity of his name, the excellence of his collars and ties, and some other things—had done so much to advance him in his career. He also offered Mr. Burnet a cigarette with the air of a man who knows that he is only making a conventional gesture.

" No, thanks," said Mr. Burnet brusquely. He produced a short, thick black cigar and cut a deep notch in the butt of it. Having lit it, he turned his gaze from his chief and scowled intently at the floor for several seconds. There was no real community of spirit between these two devoted men, though to each of them almost equally—if only it had ever heard of them—the public would have looked for a masterly handling of the difficult business of Circumvention. Mr. Blood was of the type of Civil Servant who looks enviously at those states where the Civil Service is more highly esteemed even than in England, and where the deserving bureaucrat may attain to cabinet rank and emoluments without encountering the difficulties and expenses of a Parliamentary career. He knew that he could not do this in England, and he regretted it. He knew, however, that he could do a great deal ; and he meant to do it. I need hardly tell you that he did not enter the Service by way of the usual channels. He received his first start as reward for a slight kindness he had been able to show to the nephew of a Cabinet Minister in a quarter of one of our great industrial towns, where the young man found himself late one night and rather at sea ; and but for the statesman's gratitude it is possible that Mr. Blood might have continued to waste his talents in the desert of provincial journalism. His enterprise and decision as Assistant Conservator of Bill-Posting Stations on

Government land had attracted notice; and he was called away from these important duties to reorganise the administrative work of the Commissioners of Interference. It must be admitted that his appearance stood him in good stead. He was short, slender and dapper; and his eyes shone with a suave but active light. His short, fair moustache—not a toothbrush, oh not a toothbrush!—ran from corner to corner of his mouth in a line as neat and even as the stroke under his precise and almost microscopic signature. On the first day of war his country found that her greater need of his abilities was in the Circumvention Branch; and there he was appointed, much to the annoyance of Mr. Burnet, who disliked change.

Mr. Burnet possessed one of those stubborn and dogged natures which are the glory of our race and which are so particularly suited to the conditions of trench warfare, whether in the field or in the sphere of administration. It was reflected in the blue tinge of his clean-shaven upper lip, in his large stone-grey eyes and in his rather bulky figure which was all one breadth from shoulders to feet. His paramount aim in life was to preserve his habits undisturbed, to arrive at eleven in the morning and to have a regular week-end of golf in the Surrey hills; and he often found that this object was most easily to be obtained by the prompt and thorough discharge of his duties. So far as it might prove to be compatible with the main ambition of his life, he also desired to become a Companion of the Bath. He was, as must be apparent to the reader, a man of simple and direct vision. He had taken two firsts in the Mathematical Tripos at Cambridge and had passed eleventh in the Civil Service examination, rejecting, as he was entitled to do, with indignation, the proposal that he should take up an appointment in Bombay, where the habits of the English colony are quite different from those obtaining in England.

Mr. Burnet, as I have said, disliked change. He regarded anything new as guilty until it proved its innocence to his own satisfaction ; and, as he usually declined to listen to its arguments, this happened very rarely. He was now doubly dissatisfied. Mr. Blood was new, and the proposal that he should share a room with anyone else was new. The proposal that he should share a room with Mr. Blood was of an altogether disconcerting novelty ; and, such is the irony of human things, it moved him to make a proposal which was the most novel of all. He suggested that the Circumvention Branch should take itself out of the buildings of the Circumlocution Office and set up house elsewhere. He made the suggestion with regret. There was nothing in the Circumlocution Office that was not a part of his habits. When he arrived there in the morning, the policeman at the door saluted him deferentially, and he stepped across the great marble entrance hall and through what appeared to be a cupboard door and was really the door of the lift, and into what appeared to be a packing-case but was really the lift itself. Then an old man, hauling on a rope, dragged the no longer new but still solidly constructed machine up to the first floor, where Mr. Burnet disembarked about twenty minutes past eleven. In this new building, which already he contemplated without affection, there would probably be a lift in which someone would turn a handle and whisk him up without even making a remark about the weather. Mr. Burnet had never capped this remark, to which he was accustomed, but his answering scowl was part of the morning's routine.

Nevertheless he pressed his proposal with considerable insistence, and even suggested, unwontedly diplomatic, that the expansion of the branch was inevitable and would be facilitated by such a step. Mr. Blood visibly brightened at this. He had seen certain objections to the scheme hitherto ; for, though he felt himself capable of keeping an eye on Smith, Bootle and Runter, he was not at all sure what they would do when his eye was not upon them. But that consideration, he was bound to own in his private thoughts, cut both ways. . . . " Certainly, certainly, Burnet," he said, with a charming smile, " I quite see the force of what you say. There is a good deal of new work upon which, I have been thinking lately, we ought to embark." Mr. Burnet's expression of settled irritability grew more pronounced. But Mr. Blood was unperturbed. " I have been wondering," he continued, " whether you will not yourself be in need of assistance. Now, I heard the other day that——"

" I don't think he would be at all suited to the work," cried Mr. Burnet fiercely. Mr. Blood regarded him with a suave expression which indicated neither amusement nor annoyance.

" I wish you would consider it," he urged. " I don't know whether you know the man I have in mind. I mean——"

" His office would never spare him. Wouldn't think of it for a minute,'' returned Mr. Burnet, with unabated truculence. Mr. Blood stroked his chin reflectively. It looked uncommonly as though he were never going to be able to persuade his colleague to relax his grip on the branch! He showed no signs of disappointment, however, but replied mildly:

"Well, well, that's a pity. But perhaps you can think of someone more conveniently situated?" Mr. Burnet indicated a negative, and added that in the present position it was absurd to suppose that any really good man would be transferred from his own office to new work.

"Such things do occasionally happen, when the necessity can be proved." Mr. Blood's forbearance was remarkable. "But I may happen to find a suitable man. If I do, I will bear it in mind that you feel the need of assistance, and you can trust me to make representations——" Mr. Burnet dissented violently but hardly articulately.

Mr. Blood felt that it was time to draw off his forces for the moment. If the work should at some future time be found by his superiors to have exceeded Mr. Burnet's capabilities, he had at least offered the obstinate man all the help in his power. "Well," he said, "as regards this proposal of moving, will you see what steps are necessary and get the matter started?" Mr. Burnet agreed with alacrity and withdrew.

III

Thus it came about that a minor official from the Office of Works, that Cinderella among the Departments, waited one day on Mr. Burnet, insufficiently armed with a photograph, some greasy plans and an ingratiating manner.

"Don't see how it can be made to do at all, Mr. Jones," Mr. Burnet declared fiercely, without looking at the plans—for his true nature was beginning to assert itself again.

"But, Mr. Burnet . . ." remonstrated Mr. Jones.

"What's that you say?" Mr. Burnet asked.

Mr. Jones withdrew, and spent the rest of the day walking helplessly and dismally round Westminster, hoping that something would turn up. Mr. Burnet returned to an official file which contained an embittered dispute between himself and the Director of Delays and Evasions. After contemplating it thoughtfully for some time, he added a three-line minute that would, he modestly thought, divert his opponent's attention from everything else for at least two days.

The Director, meanwhile, had begun to develop the usual strategy of the official in distress. He asked someone to lunch at his club. With a little trouble he got to hear of a great building, which had recently been completed and was not yet occupied, not too far away from the Circumlocution Office. He invited someone else to lunch at his club. He accepted an invitation to lunch. He ate and counter-ate for nearly a fortnight, and at last the matter was arranged. One Tuesday morning the staff of the Circumvention Branch was informed that, in order to bring some of its more important members within easy reach of the Assistant Director, it had been decided that certain changes of seating were to be made. It then came about that those who sat in the corridors were moved into rooms, while those who sat in rooms were moved into corridors. By five o'clock, order was partially restored. The head of the Local Authorities subdivision had lost the decoration of his room and the inspiration of his work (a portrait of Mr. Bottomley); and one of the typists had lost her right-hand glove. These never appeared again; but practically everything else was recovered, with the exception of one paper which contained an important precedent laid down in 1863. This was found again, two years later, in the telephone exchange at the Treasury, and was restored with as much pomp as the eagles of Crassus. It became meanwhile a sorrow to the elder, and a legend to the younger, members of the Circumvention Branch.

It was at this moment that Mr. Burnet sent for his principal agent or general handyman and informed him that the whole branch was to be moved the following morning at half-past nine to Transatlantic Chambers. Having made this announcement, Mr. Burnet blew his nose loudly and signified his disinclination for further idle talk by a series of grunts in the descending chromatic scale.

Mr. Evans, outwardly undisturbed, retired without comment. Outside the door he drew his handkerchief and frankly mopped a brow which was beginning to exhibit deep lines of care.

The members of the branch received the news with a resignation that was rapidly becoming part of their spiritual life. They anticipated, perhaps, a repetition of their experiences in the last move but three. On that occasion the sub-division whose business it was to distribute the incoming letters to the branch had been completely lost for over forty-eight hours, and had only been discovered at last by accident in a small room in the basement with no windows. During that happy time the branch had caught up to the extent of nearly a day with its accumulated arrears.

Mr. Evans gathered his assistants around him and threw himself into the work with a sort of jaded energy. He appeared, at intervals, to be swallowing rapidly, but he used a strict minimum of language. One of his subordinates desperately besought him to look for a moment at a thick, dusty and dog-eared file. A man in South Shields, he said, had been waiting for three weeks for a reply from the Department and, unless he received it the next day, would be obliged to file his petition in bankruptcy.

" Put that on one side," said Mr. Evans, without ruth. " Just now we've got to attend to the things that really matter."

Meanwhile, not far off, the Director of Circumvention held a conclave with his private secretaries. He had fewer than the Secretary of State. He had no more than three; but they all worked. He saw to that. His principal anxieties were now the colour of the carpet in his new room, the arrangements for his telephone and the safe removal of the book-case which contained, among other things, his presentation copy of Lord Morley's great work on compromise. He brushed aside a timid suggestion that he should have a bed installed for his use on occasion. This was very popular in the early days of the war, and proved very effective until the Office of Works protested. "When I stay all night at the office," he said, with decision, "it is not to sleep." He noted mentally that it might be a good idea to repeat this remark to Smith, on some suitable occasion—preferably in the presence of Runter. It would, he thought, at least be one in the eye for Runter, who kept ostentatiously in his room a bed supplied by the Office of Works, and a thermos flask and a hot-water bottle supplied by himself.

It was long after midnight on that crowded night before all these things were settled. Mr. Blood had just declared the proceedings at an end, when a fresh thought struck him. A porter must be engaged to stand in the front hall; and a sufficiently striking uniform must be found for the porter; and the uniform must be decorated with the monogram C.B.—*not* the monogram C.O.

"But Sir James Bootle . . ." objected the second secretary plaintively. He was tired, he had been packing up confidential papers, and his collar had come undone.

"You will arrange that with Sir James Bootle," Mr. Blood said. "And you," as he fixed the third secretary with his eye, "will go yourself early to-morrow to buy the carpet I decided on. I will give you the address."

"But Mr. Runter has always insisted," said the third secretary, with an air of desperation, "that all demands for carpets must go through him."

"*You*," Mr. Blood replied, "will arrange that with Mr. Runter—when you have bought the carpet."

Like General Joffre on the eve of the battle of the Marne, Mr. Burnet went home early and went to bed.

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IV

One morning towards the end of the following March, Mr. Evans, seduced by the premonitions of spring in the air, arose from the darkness of the District Railway at Westminster, in order to walk, contrary to his custom, along Whitehall to Transatlantic Chambers. The sky was blue, with little white clouds drifting idly across it; and columns of dust—the surplus, perhaps, from the supply kept for the eyes of the public—were sweeping down the wide street. There was an atmosphere of relaxation in that responsible centre; and it so affected Mr. Evans that he allowed his mind to drift into the vague and unprofitable paths of retrospection.

A great deal had happened since the preceding December, when the great move had taken place. The Circumvention Branch, free, or nearly free, from the trammels of its parent office, had flourished like a sickly flower transplanted into a new and more nourishing soil. It even threatened to swallow up some of the very promising growths around it. It had expanded, fulfilling beyond all expectation the prophecy which Mr. Burnet had so reluctantly made and which Mr. Blood had so avidly accepted. Circumvention had proved to be more and more in demand. Never before had there been so many things and persons to be circumvented. The spare talent of the country streamed into the machine; and Sir James Bootle wept daily, in the presence of the pigeons, at the growing establishment figures. Mr. Burnet's salary had been increased, and Mr. Blood's salary had been very largely increased.

Mr. Evans, too, had been promoted. From a position in which he received three hundred a year, with overtime pay amounting to about one hundred and fifty a year, he had been advanced to a position of greater dignity, corresponding to his larger responsibilities, in which he received three hundred and fifty a year, without payment for overtime. Mr. Burnet, tersely, and Mr. Blood, with some eloquence, had congratulated him on his advancement and on the improvement in his status. Mr. Burnet also remarked, as an afterthought, that it had been decided to add several new duties to those which he at present discharged and that these might, nay, almost certainly would, oblige him to stay somewhat later at night than his custom had been. Here Mr. Evans began rather abstractedly to speculate on the question of last trains. Mr. Blood had adverted with warm and noticeable pleasure to the fact that he had been able to secure Mr. Runter's consent to a very considerable ante-dating of the promotion. His pleasure was so marked and expressed in tones of friendship so cordial that Mr. Evans broke out into confused but hearty exclamations of gratitude and withdrew from the presence, feeling that these indeed were wonderful days for men who could seize their opportunities.

Even when the cashier demanded back from him the money which he had received for overtime, and thoughtlessly squandered, since the date now fixed for his promotion, his gratitude was not at all obscured.

He merely argued the precise amount which was to be refunded ; and, when he was eventually worsted in argument, he only complained that the cashier must be using a "cooked" ready reckoner, specially prepared by the Stationery Office for such occasions as these.

Now, as he wandered slowly down Whitehall, it occurred to him, reviewing all things together, that there must have been a catch somewhere. A mood of greater concentration might indeed have developed in him a discontented spirit which would have been unusual, improper, nay, even almost indecent, in a member of the great, united and self-sacrificing body of men to which he belonged. But happily his attention was ready to be distracted ; and the sight of blinds not yet pulled up in the War Office gave him a distracting sense of satisfaction with the virtues of his own Department and with his own virtues in particular. It was therefore with a swelling breast and a cheerful expression that he entered Transatlantic Chambers. The porter, splendidly uniformed and decorated with the monogram C.B., observed the beaming face and infused some cordiality into his respectful greeting. He was more afraid of Mr. Evans than of any other member of the staff with whom he came in contact, except Mr. Burnet ; and a comparison of the one fear with the other would be as little useful as comparisons of the finite with the infinite usually are. But his imagination was solely responsible for his fear of Mr. Burnet, who had never yet spoken to him and who had probably not realised the fact of his existence. With Mr. Blood he was on terms of great good-fellowship.

Mr. Evans returned the porter's greeting in a friendly manner and went to his room. It was very large, and accommodated, beside himself, some twenty or more persons, who were his staff, and a great number of cupboards and presses containing the documents which were in his care. On his entry, seven boy clerks extricated themselves from the kicking and dusty mass in which they had been lying on the floor and went to their places bidding him good morning as they went. One of his temporary clerks, a very old gentleman with long side-whiskers and the expression of an irritated patriarch, walked past him without taking any notice of him, saying in a loud and querulous voice, "These boys . . . nobody here who can keep them in order . . . disgraceful!"

Mr. Evans continued to smile blissfully and sat down at his desk, which stood in a dignified way apart from those of his subordinates. As he did so the telephone bell rang, and, seizing the instrument, he roared into it at the top of his powerful voice, "Hullo! who's that?" No reply rewarded him save a noise which suggested that a large dynamo had got into difficulties and was fast breaking up. Then he heard a thin, distant voice saying, "I can't help it then, I shall have to refer it to the Treasury. . . ." Another crash, followed by a buzzing sound. The voice resumed, "Can't authorise it . . ." (crash!) ". . . fourpence more than the schedule. . . ." The noises overwhelmed the voice and appeared to be playing a fantasia with pokers on tea-trays. Mr. Evans continued at intervals to shout into the instrument, growing ever more and more exasperated, till suddenly there was a lull in which he could hear an indistinct voice muttering the name of Mr. Burnet. " No," he shouted, relieved, " Mr. Burnet isn't here yet." The voice went on mumbling, and still nothing but the name could be apprehended. " No," said Mr. Evans, " and I am afraid you couldn't speak to him if he were." (For he knew very well that anyone of real importance would have rung up Mr. Burnet direct.) " What's your business . . . be quick, please, I am very busy. No," with an infuriated crescendo, and " I TELL YOU MR. BURNET IS NOT HERE YET ! " A deathly silence fell on the line ; and in the midst of it Mr. Evans caught the sound of well-known accents saying wrathfully, " Is that you, Evans ? This is Mr. Burnet speaking."

" Yes, Mr. Burnet," replied Mr. Evans, still roaring, but now much more like a sucking-dove, " I am afraid there has been something wrong with the line."

" Yes," said Mr. Burnet, unappeased. " I shall be working at home to-day."

" Yes, Mr. Burnet," Mr. Evans said. " Shall I tell the Director, when he comes ? "

" No need to trouble Mr. Blood." A click announced that the conversation was over. Mr. Evans pushed back the instrument, breathing hard.

" I might have known it," he murmured reflectively, gazing out of the open window ; and, when he looked back and saw a boy clerk throwing paper pellets at his side-whiskered temporary clerk, he spoke with more than his usual severity. Then he turned to the morning's work with a slightly wistful expression on his face. He lingered over nothing long, save a letter from an inventor who, having failed with the War Office, the Admiralty and the embryo of the Ministry of Munitions, had been seized with the happy thought that the Director of Circumvention might turn from his customary functions and set up in competition with these departments in the supply of war material. Mr. Evans considered this document with care and finally attached a minute-sheet to it, on which he wrote, "This suggestion affects the constitution of the department and may need an opinion from the Treasury Solicitor. Perhaps it should be submitted to the Secretary of State." He then sent it to await Mr. Burnet's arrival, when the weather should break.

He had just concluded action on these lines when a shadow fell across the papers in front of him. He looked up, and beheld his old friend and colleague Mr. Roker. Mr. Roker was a long and cadaverous creature, whose morning-coat was a little bespattered with ink and whose waistcoat was marked with deep horizontal folds. His cheerful self-confidence was belied by the hollowness of his cheeks, the length of his chin and the draggled wispiness of an untrimmed and bitten moustache; but it was betrayed by a certain glint in his eyes. He was a master of the subtleties of administration; and no one transacted business with him on the telephone without a witness listening on the parallel extension.

"Hullo, Roker," said Mr. Evans breezily. "How's the estate?"

"Oh, all right," Mr. Roker replied, without changing his expression. "I don't know what you mean, but I daresay it's all right."

"Oh, go on," returned Mr. Evans. "Haven't you bought a new house lately?"

"Not since last October," Mr. Roker affirmed, with dignity.

"And what became of the one in Wimbledon?"

"I sold it."

"What, with the defective drains and the smell in the scullery?"

"There was no smell in the scullery when the purchaser saw over it," said Mr. Roker, with an expression of sinister triumph.

"You *are* a man," observed Mr. Evans admiringly. Then he pursued his researches with the same tenacity which made him so useful in the conduction of public affairs. "What became of little Butt—you know . . . in Delays and Evasions?"

"I don't know," Mr. Roker said. "Haven't seen him for a long time."

"But didn't you sell him that house of yours in Enfield?" Mr. Roker's answering monosyllable was indistinct, but it appeared to be rather an evasion than an honest negative. "Then it was some relation of his—wasn't it his father?" Mr. Evans continued.

"Yes, it was his father," said Mr. Roker gloomily, seeing that his last defences were penetrated.

"Well, where's his father now?"

"Dead," Mr. Roker replied, with funereal finality.

"Well, you *are* a man," said Mr. Evans jocosely, but still with admiration. "And how's work, eh?" Mr. Roker seemed to recover his spirits, and his eyes regained their cheerful expression.

"We've got a new dodge," he said slowly, as if weighing his friend's worthiness for the revelation that these words heralded.

Mr. Evans was sceptical. " Yes, I know," he said, " I know you and your dodges. Means getting Blood to do something without consulting Bootle, and then, when the trouble begins, who was it that made the mistake ? Why, you, of course. *I* know your blinking dodges. I've been had that way myself."

" Did you ever hear of the Defence of the Realm Act ? " asked Mr. Roker patiently, in no way disconcerted by the delivery of Mr. Evans's ripe wisdom.

" Something about spies and harbours, isn't it ? " Mr. Evans hazarded vaguely.

" Bless your life, it's about a lot more than that," Mr. Roker replied, triumph beginning to rise in his voice. " It's about railways and babies' comforters and beer, and it's about circumvention. In fact, it's about anything you care to mention. That's the beauty of the whole thing," he continued, warming to his theme. " It's about any blessed thing you care to think of. Gives the Government authority to do anything they like. Why, if they were to make an order under it to-morrow that all babies were to be born blue, all babies would just have to be born blue. There's no getting round it."

Mr. Evans regarded this triumph of modern legislation with his usual caution and common-sense. " It can't be quite as sweeping as all that," he said. " The country won't stand it."

" It is," Mr. Roker insisted, with satisfaction. " That's just where you're wrong. It *is* as sweeping as all that. And bless you, you can't tell what the country will stand until you try. We've never really tried yet."

"And what are you going to do with it?" asked Mr. Evans.

"Why," Mr. Roker cried enthusiastically, "we just get a regulation made—there's some nonsense about laying it on the table of the House, but all that's easy enough these days—and then whenever we want to circumvent a man we just serve an order on him, and he has to do whatever we tell him."

It must be owned that Mr. Evans, though an admirable and a hard-working official, had not the enterprise or the breadth of vision which the emergencies of war called forth in so many of his colleagues. "The country won't stand it," he repeated. "You'll just be running yourself into no end of trouble. Besides, even if the country would, Burnet won't ever touch it with a pitchfork."

"Oh, Burnet——" said Mr. Roker, with a gesture.

"No, he won't," said Mr. Evans. "Can you imagine him? Unless, of course," he added as an afterthought, "he thought it might be the end of Blood. And I daresay it would be, and of you too, if you meddle with it. Now I warn you——"

"But you might get my job if I burst," Mr. Roker suggested playfully.

"Your job?" cried Mr. Evans, with vehemence. "I wouldn't have your job if my life depended on it. How many barristers have you got now?"

"Three," Mr. Roker replied.

"And do you run them or do they run you?"

"The matter is still technically in dispute," Mr.

Roker observed. " One of them signs my letters—when he sees 'em. But I shall have them in hand before long. And I'd sooner have them than your temporary clerks." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder towards the side-whiskered patriarch who was trying to do a sum on his fingers. Mr. Evans regarded the mathematician with tolerant interest and saw the calculation break down three times at the index finger of the second hand.

" Poor old buffer," he said, without bitterness. " I told him to give me a statement showing how many boy clerks there were working in this room. Have you heard that there's a new Higher Division man coming into the branch ? "

" I've seen him," said Mr. Roker.

" Is he going to take over your division ? "

" No," said Mr. Roker slowly and apparently concealing some pleasant emotion. " He's going to help Burnet, I think, and keep an eye on you from time to time."

Mr. Evans was ingenuously aggrieved. " That's a bit thick," he complained. " What sort of a chap is he ? "

" Oh, a thruster," Mr. Roker replied, with pleasurable emphasis. " Sort of man who means to get on in the Service."

" I don't know why they don't put him with you," said Mr. Evans. " He and the three barristers might be able to hold you down."

" I daresay I could make use of him," Mr. Roker observed complacently. " I want someone to take the kicks. The barristers aren't any use. Burnet sends for me when there's trouble going."

Mr. Evans regarded Mr. Roker with a gaze partly incredulous and partly admiring. He was inclined to regard this boast, and indeed much of his friend's conversation, as no more than *panache;* but he felt a deep respect for a bravo who could talk so lightly of the principalities and powers before whom the rank and file of the Service must quail. For him the Higher Division was the Higher Division, Mr. Burnet the most exalted court of appeal and Mr. Blood a deity whom he could not approach. Truly, there was the public, whom his lightest movement might mysteriously offend; but, should that happen, the public, by the instrumentality of Smith, would vent its wrath on Mr. Burnet or Mr. Blood, supposing it could screw Smith up to that point. (Smith would first have to pacify Runter and circumvent Bootle.) And if Mr. Burnet or Mr. Blood were for his fault chastised with whips, they would certainly chastise him with scorpions. He had no desire to imitate Mr. Roker's atheistical daring; but nevertheless he admired the Heaven-defying hero.

At this moment a statue of stone properly should enter; but Heaven overlooked Mr. Roker for the moment and dealt otherwise with the world. A young man suddenly appeared before Mr. Evans's table and seemed to desire that he should be noticed. He had not been heard to enter or approach. He was suddenly there; and Mr. Roker and Mr. Evans looked at him with a good deal of surprise.

Meeting their gaze, he said simply: "The porter told me I had better come in here."

"And what do you want?" asked Mr. Evans.

"I don't know," the young man replied. "At least, I thought I did, but the porter says not." Then, observing a look of complete bewilderment on Mr. Evans's face, he hastened to explain, " You see, I——"

" Well, so long, Evans," said Mr. Roker, and departed.

" You see, I——" the young man began again.

" Excuse me a moment," Mr. Evans said gruffly, with what he believed to be a good imitation of Mr. Burnet repelling an intruder. The young man watched him helplessly for a few minutes while he scribbled fiercely on a piece of paper which, when he had finished, he crushed in his hand and threw on the floor.

" Now," he resumed, " what can I do for you ? "

" Well, I hardly know," the young man murmured. " You see, I had——"

" But I can't help you if you don't know what you want, can I ? " said Mr. Evans, with a magisterial air.

" Well, you see, it's really like this." And the young man leant in long curves on the table and gazed confidingly into the eyes of the official. Mr. Evans looked with distrust at his large round spectacles, at his loose limbs, at the baggy grey flannel suit he was wearing and, particularly, at a large ink-stain which extended from just below the right lapel to just above the left-hand pocket of his coat. Then he resigned himself to hearing the stranger's story.

" You see, it's like this," said the young man. " I had a letter and I thought it was from Mr. Blood asking me to call on him this morning, and I came to call on him ; but I forgot to bring the letter, and the porter says it can't really be Mr. Blood at all." He paused to take breath. Mr. Evans said, " Ah yes," in a non-committal tone, betraying as little as he could the fact that he had not got the hang of the thing.

" You see," the young man went on—he was one of those to whom shyness lends a quite futile eloquence—" the letter certainly was signed by William Blood, but the porter says that that doesn't mean anything."

" It doesn't," Mr. Evans interjected.

" Well, that's very difficult to understand ; but anyway he says that without the letter he can't tell at all what it really was, and he thought perhaps you might know."

" What were you to call about ? "

" Oh, it was about a job ! " And the young man came to an unexpected full stop.

" But wasn't there any mark on the letter ? " Mr. Evans inquired.

" N-n-no, I don't think so. There was the date and —ah, yes—I do think there was a little blot in the bottom right-hand corner. But that——"

" No, no, not that. Wasn't there any number typed at the top of the letter ? "

" No," said the young man, shaking his head doubtfully. " No, I don't think there was anything typed on the letter. You see, it was a written letter——"

" Now, there," Mr. Evans interrupted, with an air of exasperated patience, " now, why didn't you tell me that before ? It was written, you say ? "

" Oh yes, all written," the young man said seriously.

" Then," said Mr. Evans, " it *was* from Mr. Blood, and he *does* want to see you himself." He looked at the young man as one who had been singled out for a dangerous but glorious enterprise. Meeting with no response, he rang a bell and consigned the adventurer into the hands of a messenger.

" Take Mr.—er—Mr.—er——"

" Hammond," said the young man in a friendly way. " Cyril Hammond."

" —Mr. Hammond up to Mr. Wilson's room."

" But I thought it *was* Mr. Blood ? " cried the young man despairingly.

" Mr. Wilson is Mr. Blood's chief secretary," replied Mr. Evans in a soothing voice. " You just go with the messenger and it will be all right." He delayed returning to his papers for a moment in order that he might see the young man go out of the room ; but he was disappointed. There was a soundless movement of the air ; and Cyril and the messenger, it seemed, had gently vanished.

V

As Cyril followed the messenger into the lift he gazed about him everywhere with wonder. The war, which effected many strange conjunctions of personality and environment, never did anything stranger than when it wafted him into an office. It was perfectly true, as his uncle had assured him, that a Government office was not quite like a real office. Nevertheless he found it all unfamiliar and impressive; and his wonder fed on the fact that here travelling in the same lift with him were two officials, two of the hidden brains who were organising his country's indomitable resistance to the enemy. He had heard much of the intellectual characteristics of the bureaucrat. He had been told how, since the momentous day on which Mr. Sidney Webb had left the Colonial Office, the spirit of public efficiency which had burgeoned and blossomed unappreciated in that stony soil had re-entered the Service from without, permeated it and filled its members with a new devotion and a new passion for statistics. He knew that the staff of the Circumlocution Office no longer spent short mornings and shorter afternoons roasting coat-tails over blazing fires. Transatlantic Chambers, indeed, as he had himself observed, was heated throughout by radiators. And he noticed with thrilling interest that these buttresses of the national fabric, in whose company he was making a breathless upward journey, were no longer the smooth and idle creatures of society who had awed, while they had exasperated, the public of an earlier day. They clearly paid little attention to their dress, there was a look of purpose in their eyes, and one of them seemed, in his zeal for the public service, to have forgotten to shave. . . . The lift stopped with a jar at the fourth floor.

" Nah then, young woman," said one of the bureaucrats, as the gates flew open. He waved the lift attendant aside and picked up a bag of tools from the floor. His companion took up several coils of telephone wire and followed him heavily out. The gates clanged to again, and the lift continued its ascent.

At the sixth floor, the messenger led Cyril out and conducted him down a long corridor. Twice on the way she paused for conversation with one of her colleagues—on the first occasion to seek advice on a point of topography, and on the second to impart information regarding the habits of a person named " Old Smiler." Cyril realised dimly and with something of a shock that this was an affectionate designation for Mr. Evans. Towards the end of the corridor she began to waver, and glanced from door to door in indecision. This revived terrible memories in Cyril. Once in earlier days he had made a fruitless pilgrimage to the War Office in quest of a commission. He had then been entrusted to the care of a diminutive boy scout in kilts, who bore on his shoulder straps the words " North London," and was perhaps one of the savage denizens of what are so often referred to as the Northern Heights. This intrepid mountaineer had led Cyril through several passages and up several flights of stairs, with increasing hesitation, until they reached the top floor, when he had thrown himself down on the highest step and confessed, weeping bitterly, that not only was he ignorant of the whereabouts of their destination, but that he was equally incapable of finding the way back to their point of starting. Cyril had nightmare recollections of the hour he had spent leading the weeping Highlander by the hand and endeavouring to dry his tears while they plodded through the gloomy defiles of that intricate building. He feared a repetition of this adventure, and was consequently relieved when the messenger at last selected a door, knocked on it with one hand, opened it simultaneously with the other and thrust him in.

Once in, he stood trembling, filled with an anxiety lest this should be thought somewhat unceremonious. But before he could apologise a small round man demanded of him, "Where did you come from ?" And then, without waiting for a reply, rose from his desk and hurled himself past Cyril, muttering angrily, "That messenger . . ." He disappeared, and the door slammed behind him.

Cyril recovered himself sufficiently to look round. The room was very small, and nearly the whole of the floor space was taken up by three desks, a book-case and a table. Each desk was covered with a litter of papers in billowing confusion, and the two remaining occupants of the room seemed to Cyril to be flapping hopelessly among them like men under a landslide. One of the two, an elongated creature in a dishevelled morning-coat, was almost overwhelmed. His fingers were covered with ink, his hair fell wildly about his forehead, and every three or four minutes he was obliged to pause to search for his ink-pot which, as persistently, he hid again under a mass of documents. The other, a squarer man with a determined expression, was working with greater regularity and method. At precise intervals he selected unerringly a paper from the confusion, hastily ran through it, scribbled something at the end and pitched it at a tray on the table beside him. As he did not watch it after it left his hand, and as he consistently misjudged the distance, these papers were gradually accumulating on the floor and soon began to encroach on the space where Cyril stood.

Cyril therefore drew a pace or two aside and hastily recoiled, seeing that he was blundering into an entanglement of bell and telephone wires which depended from the desks. At this moment, the ink-stained worker, with a convulsive movement of his leg, overturned a waste-paper basket which discharged its contents on Cyril's feet. He recoiled again, and took up a position near the door which he judged to be one of comparative safety. Neither of the two secretaries addressed a word to him; but occasionally the more frenzied of the two, when he could not find his inkpot or when he upset it, looked up and ejaculated passionately, " My God ! "

After about ten minutes the small round man returned, panting a little and still very angry. He bustled past Cyril, fell over the wire entanglements, swore and sat down at his desk. A circular sweep of his arm cleared most of the papers on to the floor, and a wooden calendar shot by Cyril, grazing his ankle. The incensed dignitary said to Cyril, with some harshness in his tone :

" The messenger ought not to have sent you in like that. She ought to have left you outside and told me that you were there." Cyril murmured that he was very sorry. The small man continued :

" I couldn't catch her. I ran after her all the way down to the first floor and then lost her. What was she like ? I really must make a complaint."

Cyril tried to put together his fugitive recollections, but, after considerable thought, he could remember nothing more of the messenger than that her face was rather pimply.

" Complexion rather pimply . . ." muttered his interrogator, writing rapidly on a slip of paper. " Can't you remember anything else about her ? No ? A pity. A great pity. But I shall do my best," he went on, with determination. " This must be stopped. The messengers are very badly supervised. *I* can't see to everything." Cyril murmured inarticulate sympathy, not trusting himself to be tactful in the choice of words. Mr. Blood's chief secretary received his sympathy without any visible signs of mollification. Then he turned abruptly to the problem of Cyril's existence, which the traditional courtesy of the Service inclined him to consider, though it had been brought to his notice in so irregular a way. As he was cross-examining Cyril on his qualifications for a position of trust, the ink-stained gentleman began to display agitation and uneasiness.

" I say, Wilson," he exclaimed, with an expression of mild panic, " I thought I heard . . . didn't you hear . . . ? "

" No, nonsense, Bulge," said Mr. Wilson brusquely. " I can hear nothing at all." The square secretary looked up at the door, listened intently for a moment and went on throwing papers on to the floor, like a machine in which some small cog has given way without impairing the activity of the whole contrivance.

Mr. Wilson continued his cross-examination, tabulating Cyril's accomplishments in a manner which increasingly discouraged the candidate as the list grew longer. Cyril was particularly hurt on several occasions when Mr. Wilson seemed to think this or that among his scanty talents unworthy even to be noted down; and he was at last so much vexed by one omission that he craned his neck to see what really had been recorded. He thus discovered that Mr. Wilson had been composing in a neat and precise hand a fantasia on the words: "Hammond, Cyril. King's College, Cambridge. Age, twenty-four. No clerical experience," which were repeated at intervals in different orders on the slip of paper. He felt that this summarised somewhat unjustly the account which he had given of himself; but before he had time to consider whether he should make a protest, his attention and that of Mr. Wilson were again diverted by the obvious perturbation of Mr. Bulge.

"I say, Wilson," said Mr. Bulge, "I'm *sure* I heard . . ."

"No, nonsense, Bulge," Mr. Wilson answered irritably. "You didn't hear anything, Johnson, did you? It's not eleven yet." The square secretary, thus addressed, glanced up and was suddenly petrified, following with a pained look and a dropping jaw the too brief trajectory of the paper which he had just dispatched. He rose slowly from his seat, gathered up the scattered documents, stacked them methodically and dropped them in the tray for which they were intended. The tray, perched insecurely on the edge of the table, overbalanced and fell with a loud crash, dispersing the papers in all directions.

"No," said Mr. Johnson, sitting down again. "I didn't hear anything."

"Well," Mr. Wilson rapped, turning to Cyril. "I suppose you'll have to see the Director. It's really not much use my talking to you as he wants to see you. You'd better be ready to go in as soon as he comes." At this moment they all heard the sound of footsteps, sharp, regular and authoritative, advancing along the corridor. "That's him," cried Mr. Bulge, dread and triumph mingling in his voice. The three secretaries immediately straightened themselves up in their several manners; and Mr. Wilson with an air of ceremony opened the door communicating with the next room, Mr. Johnson and Mr. Bulge falling into place behind him, Mr. Bulge nervously fingering the ends of his bow-tie, which threatened instant collapse. Cyril, awed but curious, took up the position which seemed to offer the best opportunities to a sightseer; and, looking over Mr. Bulge's shoulder, he admired Mr. Blood's spacious room with its tastefully designed book-case and its beautiful carpet. Then the door from the corridor was thrown open by an aged porter of still military appearance (he had been in the police) who stood respectfully holding it for the entrance of the small yet impressive figure of Mr. Blood. Mr. Bulge sprang fantastically forward and seized the potentate's dispatch-case, Mr. Johnson more leisurely his morning paper. The porter received his hat and stick and reverently disposed of them. Mr. Wilson, standing rigid by the desk, laid on it a typewritten sheet of paper, an account of his stewardship, which shone white and lonely in the vast void expanse.

Mr. Blood walked forward in majesty, drew up his chair and sat down. The ceremony was over.

" The Director will see you now," said Mr. Wilson, returning with a rapt expression, like a priest emerging from the sanctuary. " Please go in." Cyril trod the threshold with trepidation.

VI

MARCH melted into April, April grew warmer and was May. At the beginning of a hot June the Civil Service relaxed a little, stretched its arms above the desk and its legs beneath and wondered whether there would be any summer leave this year. (It had wearied of speculating whether the war would be over before leave was due.) Cyril Hammond, who hardly knew what it was to take a holiday—he had never done any work—raised his head also and wondered fervently with the rest of his colleagues.

He had emerged from his interview with the Director of Circumvention still in possession of his faculties but very severely shaken ; and he had left Transatlantic Chambers not merely unable to decide whether Mr. Blood's oratory was intended to convey a satisfactory conclusion, but even less able to be sure that he still desired a position on the staff of that impressive personality. Mr. Blood had been suave and friendly ; there had been nothing overt in his reception of Cyril to strike a chill into the faintest heart. But Cyril had observed his secretaries closely and doubted his own ability to live at so intense a pressure. Besides, in a charming but emphatic way, Mr. Blood had made it clear that on the success of the Circumvention Branch the fortunes of the Allies hung ; and Cyril had gathered, from remarks less explicit, but not less pregnant, that Mr. Blood's fortunes depended from the same thread.

The Allies, he reflected, would be remote; but in Transatlantic Chambers Mr. Blood would be dreadfully close. He reeled up the broad pavement of Whitehall, urgently desiring stimulants; but he entered none of the public-houses which he passed. The distinction which they propounded to him between Private, Saloon and Public Bars was more difficult than he felt himself capable of making; and he reached Piccadilly Circus before he discovered a less complicated place of refreshment.

Here, as he sat meditatively drinking out of a large mug of lager beer, he strove to reassure himself by calculating the disparity between the remuneration he had been offered (three pounds a week) and the responsibilities which he perhaps unnecessarily dreaded. As he was engaged in these processes of thought, a new fear overwhelmed him. The Director had pointed out with lucid insistence that no man knew when the call would come but that when it came it must be answered without delay. His appointment would perhaps not be approved until the following morning, perhaps not even until the day after that, but immediately he received a notification that his services were required he must be ready to hasten instantly to Transatlantic Chambers and to take up his share of the burden. No sooner had he caught the significance of this thought than he was outside on the pavement again, signalling for a taxi with an umbrella which belonged to the gentleman who was sitting at the next table; and he drove home to his father's house in Gloucester Road, greatly alarmed lest a telegram should have preceded him.

But as the empty weeks dragged by, Cyril's mother began to fear that the period of waiting was telling heavily on his delicate nerves; and she therefore persuaded him (though with great difficulty—for during the first fortnight of his vigil he had never left the house by day or night) to spend ten days or more at one of our popular watering-places. Judge then of his consternation, when, on the second afternoon of his stay, he received a letter, forwarded from his home, which was signed by Mr. Wilson and which adjured him to report for duty that morning at Transatlantic Chambers. He packed in a frenzy and caught the first train which left, omitting to ascertain at what hour it was due to arrive. Owing to this lack of foresight, he spent the rest of the day making short stops at no inconsiderable number of the charming but somewhat monotonous towns of the Garden of England. He arrived home in great fatigue to find that a telegram awaited him, inquiring tersely why he had not reported that morning in accordance with instructions.

The next day at nine o'clock he presented himself, pale and apprehensive, at Transatlantic Chambers and found, somewhat to his surprise though not to that of the porter, that there was no one there to receive him. In spite of his attempts to pass himself off as one of the staff—he was hampered by the fear that he might already have forfeited this honour—the porter maintained that a member of the public could not be allowed to wait in Mr. Wilson's room without danger to the cause which they all had at heart; and Cyril therefore spent ninety dull and enervating minutes in the entrance-hall. At the end of this time the porter

GOVT. GIRLS COLLEGE
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had ascertained that Mr. Wilson had been taken ill and would not be in attendance at the office that day ; and he seemed himself to have no other plans for the disposal of the visitor. Cyril timidly suggested that perhaps some other of Mr. Blood's secretaries (or even Mr. Blood himself . . . but the porter so frowned at this that Cyril desisted) could give his mind to the affair. After some consideration, the porter found this idea not unreasonable and was pleased to assent to it ; so that within little more than half an hour Cyril was again privileged to be a dazed beholder of the frenetic labours of Mr. Bulge. Mr. Wilson's desk stood widowed and forlorn, and though there were visible traces of Mr. Johnson's activities, the man himself was not there.

When he had waited a few moments without speaking, Cyril presumed to interrupt Mr. Bulge and to explain his business.

" I'm awfully sorry," said Mr. Bulge distractedly, running his fingers through his hair, " I'm awfully sorry, but I'm afraid I'm no good. Wilson's away, you know, and I don't know anything about it."

" But . . ."

" Awfully sorry, you know." Mr. Bulge wagged his head deprecatingly. " Awfully sorry, but I'm really no good at all." Cyril was at once lulled by his friendliness and alarmed by his blankness.

" Doesn't anybody know ? " he asked in despair.

" Don't suppose so," Mr. Bulge replied, with an air of candour. " Wilson wrote to you, didn't he ? Yes ? Well, the paper's on his desk, I expect, somewhere in among those—not much good my looking for it, is it ? Much better wait till Wilson comes back."

"Oh, but . . ." cried Cyril, beginning to be indignant. At this moment Mr. Johnson returned.

"I say, Johnson," said Mr. Bulge, "look here, do you know anything about this chap?" He rose from his chair as he spoke and came forward waving a bundle of papers in his hand.

"What chap?" asked Mr. Johnson, seizing the papers and beginning to run through them. "These are about the Director's carpet."

"No, no," Mr. Bulge exclaimed, dancing excitedly on one leg. "Not those, nothing to do with those. This chap here." And simultaneously he pointed to Cyril and tried to retrieve his documents from the tenacious hands of his colleague. Mr. Johnson wheeled slowly round and fixed a stern, inexpressive eye on Cyril, who judged that the moment to explain himself had arrived. This he did, though somewhat lamely and with an increasing lack of conviction. Mr. Johnson's massive features did not alter their expression during the recital: they rather settled and hardened, like molten rock taking up the shape that defies the ravages of time. Cyril felt, in spite of himself, that his story was a thin one; and he endeavoured without success to throw into it some warmth and detail, concluding with a stammered but glowing passage descriptive of his ardour to serve the Department.

"Branch —," Mr. Johnson observed in a heavy and rasping voice. "You have been appointed, I am to understand, a member of the branch. And what do you suppose you are going to do here?" The question was shot out with more suddenness than Cyril was ready for. He found, quite unexpectedly, that he hadn't the remotest notion, and reluctantly owned it, adding desperately that he had no clerical experience.

"Ah," said Mr. Johnson, reverting to his former weighty manner, "I thought as much. But I suppose"—here he frowned at Cyril and repeated—"I *suppose* the Director had some work in view for you which he thought you could do." Cyril, almost trembling into tears, was inclined to apologise for his presumption in offering his services and to withdraw all his pretensions. But Mr. Johnson had turned again to Mr. Bulge and was saying in a shattering manner, "Bulge, you must find a room for him to sit in till Wilson comes back."

VII

Cyril had been agreeably surprised by the room to which Mr. Bulge had at last conducted him. It was nearly as large as the Director's own, it was almost as luxuriously carpeted, and it was perfectly quiet and deserted. There were in it two desks, and at one of these Mr. Bulge installed him before leaving him. The other remained empty and slightly ominous. Here Cyril sat alone all the morning, with nothing to distract him from meditation upon his future labours. Nothing, that is to say, except the telephone, an instrument of which he had little experience but a proportionately deep distrust and which rang persistently at intervals of fifteen minutes or so, introducing him to wrathful voices. These varied in timbre and peremptoriness, but one and all called vainly on the name of a Mr. Bucket, which was quite unfamiliar to Cyril, cursed Cyril for a fool and were silent.

The hours crept on, the sun rose in the sky and nothing happened—nothing happened at all. Cyril began to feel the need of lunch even more pressing than the need of occupation; but he dared not desert his post. At last he was driven to the point of setting out to look for Mr. Johnson. But, having wandered down the corridor and found it impossible to identify Mr. Johnson's room, he opened a door at random in hope of enlightenment and was dismayed by the sight and the sound of Mr. Burnet disapproving his intrusion. He returned, shaken, to his own place and found that his cravings were mastered by the joint powers of duty and terror. At a little after half-past three, Mr. Johnson entered and, observing almost with geniality, "Ah, you're back from lunch, are you?" placed before him, not, as he was beginning to expect, a prison loaf and a cup of water, but a very large bundle of dusty papers.

"You might have a look through these," said Mr. Johnson. "They'll give you an idea of the procedure." He disappeared without another word. Cyril began to examine the dossier, starting with the oldest, dirtiest and most ragged paper which it contained. As he read there began to creep over him that odd sensation in which one feels that one is living again through some old experience. The letters of Mr. Arthur Clennam, first persuasive, then infuriated and lastly despairing, awakened in him a queer sense of familiarity; and when he found a minute signed with the august name of Tite Barnacle he almost, but not quite, identified the story which he was reading. It was not until he came across a mention of a Mr. Dorrit, who seemed obscurely to be a chief, if a passive person in the drama, that he realised on what he had stumbled. Sir Tite Barnacle, in his minute, asked plaintively to be informed who *was* Mr. Dorrit; but this question had been overlooked in a dispute on procedure and indeed had never been answered. The following day, Mr. Johnson looked in on Cyril and said to him, "Have you read those papers yet?" Cyril was explaining that he had nearly finished them, when Mr. Johnson airily interrupted him with "No hurry, you know, no hurry. At your leisure, of course. The case isn't settled yet, but there's no hurry," after which he went out again.

In later days Cyril looked back on those halcyon hours of ease and repose, to this sumptuous and quiet room, with the regrets of a soul exiled from Paradise. He was happy in these things and conscious of them even while they still endured—a phenomenon not commonly observed in Paradise. Certain doubts and fears did, however, oppress him. The empty desk opposite to him was ominous of change and intrusion. Sooner or later, no doubt, the rightful occupant of that throne of power—perhaps the mysterious Mr. Bucket—would return and would be incensed that Cyril had been thrust into his secret pleasaunce. Indeed, the room was much too good to be true. The contrast between it and the apartment which rang with the labours of Mr. Wilson, Mr. Johnson and Mr. Bulge gave it an air of charming but fantastic unreality. And there were, as Cyril had discovered from hasty glances through half-opened doors, rooms in which thirty or forty persons were crowded together, where the air was thick with tobacco smoke and dust, where boy clerks and temporary clerks pursued their occupations amid a roar of voices and telephone bells, which, to Cyril's fastidious ear, resembled the music of a Witch's Sabbath. Every time he entered his room in the morning he received from it a delicate but insecure pleasure. When he entered it again after lunch he drew a breath of relief at finding no angel with a flaming sword on the threshold.

As he left it in the afternoon, after staying what he considered a reasonable length of time—the hour of five was his limit—he looked round it wistfully, reflecting that he might never sit in it again. It was all a dream to him; and he began to believe that the original purposes, for which both he and the room had been intended, had been forgotten.

This was, in fact, the case. Mr. Blood had cast him for the part of telephone-boy to himself and his secretaries (he called the position that of personal assistant to Mr. Wilson); and he had entered his intention on the papers relating to Cyril's appointment. These papers had been handed to Mr. Wilson, who had accordingly written to Cyril and immediately thereafter had fallen victim to a nervous breakdown, the result of too continuous an intimacy with the electric personality of his chief. The papers had reposed untouched on his desk for four days (seven from the top in the tray marked "Urgent") until Mr. Bulge had received from Mr. Johnson instructions, too forcible to be disregarded, that he was to clear up that mess. As it happened, Cyril's paper was one of the few which caused him no perplexity. He had no difficulty in recognising it as an appointment paper and therefore dispatched it without hesitation to the Director of Establishment at the Circumlocution Office. Here, by a trivial mischance, it was tied up as the lowest in a large collection of papers containing an acrimonious dispute between the Circumlocution Office and the Treasury over a surcharge of sixteen shillings and fourpence made by a temporary inspector who had been dismissed in the second month of the war and was now in gaol. Cyril thus passed, for official purposes, into a state of obscuration. Had he been a more strenuous or a more self-seeking young man, the fact that he had received no payment for his services would have evoked some protest from him ; and this protest might have resulted at last in the rectification of the affair. But Cyril hated to give trouble.

And his days were pleasantly, if not pressingly occupied. Mr. Bulge once came in to ask him if he knew how to spell the word "ascendancy." Mr. Johnson would visit him quite frequently and on his visits would throw down a bundle of papers on his desk, saying, "Draft a letter to this fellow saying that the Department has nothing to add to its previous communication," or, "The last letter in that file ought to be acknowledged." Cyril spent agonised hours of creative labour over these tasks ; and Mr. Johnson corrected his drafts with meticulous care, altering the word "communication" to the word "letter" or striking out the word "letter" and substituting the word "communication." But Cyril was never discouraged. He knew that the technique of administration is esoteric and hard to learn.

Therefore it was with a sense of meritorious service that, in the hot midmost of June, he ceased from the almost excessive devotion to his labours which he had hitherto shown and began to meditate a holiday. When he had first entered the Circumvention Branch he had been a trifle surprised by the exiguity of the work set before him. But use accustoms the mind to all things ; and when, one day in the lift, he overheard one hard-pressed official confiding to another that the strain was telling on him and that he must positively take some leave, by insensible degrees he began to adopt the point of view as his own. The dull monotony of taking the same train every morning from the same starting-point to the same destination vexed him. He began to dream of a week-day morning when he could ask himself at breakfast what he should do with the day. He was not displeased with the thought that this question might find no very definite answer.

These dreams became particularly acute one fine morning when there were no papers on the table before him. On these vacant occasions it was his habit to devote himself to the serious study of a manual entitled *A Code of Procedure for the Use of Members of the Circumlocution Office.* Mr. Johnson had begun to be more than a little uneasy about Cyril. He did not know what in the world to do with him, nor did he dare to approach Mr. Blood on the subject ; but he feared lest Cyril's idleness and inutility should be accidentally discovered and visited on him by some apostle of efficiency made zealous by his anxiety to arrive. He could think of no useful work for Cyril to do ; but he could at least guard him against the reproach of unoccupied hours. He therefore found for him a copy of the *Code of Procedure.* It was, he said, not quite up to date, it had been compiled in fact in 1907, but, in spite of the war, little had been changed since then ; and a close and severe perusal of it could not fail to make Cyril better fitted for a position of trust. This might have fired Cyril's blood in the early days of his first enthusiasm. Now the salient point of the work for him seemed to be that in which it resembled the classic studied by Alice's sister—that there were no conversations in it. But at this moment of unrest he had no other literature with which to employ himself, and he wandered dutifully through the pages, one eye on them and one on the blue sky outside his window, cut and chequered by the fantastic and glistening roofs of Westminster. His attention was drawn only by one passage, one that he had already marked with a sign of appreciation. It ran as follows : " The office has been provided with a telephone for the use of officials for official purposes only. The instrument is situated at the Scotland Yard entrance to the main building." But even this light on ancient manners, with its attendant images (to Cyril, indeed, a hint of Arcadian years), failed to-day to touch his imagination ; and as a result he prepared to go out to lunch ten minutes before his accustomed time.

Accno-150

VIII

HE walked rather listlessly down the corridor and rang the bell of the lift.

There was no reply. He rang it again. There was again no reply. He was bored by this but used to it. It even, looked at in a certain aspect, confirmed and strengthened his self-respect, for it could not, he knew, mean that the lift-girl was insufficiently impressed by his appearance to take the trouble to attend to him. This was a thing which he sometimes suspected in underlings, messenger-girls and others, with whom he came into personal contact. But the lift-girl did not know who was ringing: it might be, for all she knew, Mr. Blood himself. Perhaps she was sleeping or gone on a journey. It was not even impossible that she was hunting. She had a bitter personal feud with the porter, concerning which the more sporting members of the staff were already beginning to lay odds that it would come to a scrimmage.

Cyril turned towards the stairs without protest and began to make his languid way downwards. To the beholder he seemed to float slowly from step to step; and this illusion was only disturbed, when, as happened once or twice on every flight, he fell over something, either the cord of a blind or his own stick.

Looking down over the balustrade he saw far below him, on one of the landings, Mr. Roker and Mr. Evans engaged in earnest conversation. Mr. Evans was one of the few persons whom Cyril, lonely in that great hive of industry, knew to speak to. There had been the first interview between them ; and once Mr. Evans had come by mistake into Cyril's room, had looked surprised and had stayed for a few minutes in restrained and rather gingerly conversation.

Cyril looked at the two bureaucratic magnates now with admiration in which envy found hardly any part. They were, he knew, men to whom had been assigned definite and mighty tasks, though not tasks outside the scope of their valued ability and industry. He pictured them now conferring on matters of state, exchanging experiences gained in the exercise of power. He admired equally the gravity of their converse and the gaiety into which they occasionally broke. He admired them both profoundly.

While he was yet afar off, Mr. Evans was saying to Mr. Roker, " I don't like these little French places. What I like is a place where you can get a good steak or a good cut off the joint, with properly boiled potatoes. So few people know how to boil potatoes well."

To which Mr. Roker replied, " I can never make up my mind whether I prefer jam roll baked or boiled."

" The baked jam roll at the Eagle," said Mr. Evans weightily, " is very good indeed. I was there yesterday."

" Yes," Mr. Roker admitted, balancing points in his mind, " but I don't know why it is, they keep you waiting so long there if you want a cut off the cold joint. Now I like a good slice of cold beef with pickles."

"Do you," asked Mr. Evans, with the eager air of the enthusiast, "do you like a lot of butter with boiled potatoes? Now at the George they bring you butter with boiled potatoes without being asked for it. I like that."

"Yes," said Mr. Roker, "I think I do. But on the whole I'd always much sooner have roasted potatoes."

At this point, Cyril passed them, and said timidly as he went by, "Good morning, Mr. Evans."

"Good morning, Hammond," replied Mr. Evans, in a tone evincing warm esteem. Cyril went on his way feeling distinctly better for it.

When he had passed the next turn of the stairs, Mr. Roker turned again to Mr. Evans and said, "Now I wonder what good that chap is to anyone?"

"Well," Mr. Evans replied tolerantly, "he's somebody, isn't he? Friend of Blood's or something."

"Nonsense!" It was one of Mr. Roker's strong points that in some odd fashion of his own he seemed to have accurate information about the status, prospects and gifts of everyone employed in the office. "Nonsense! Blood took him on and couldn't think what to do with him and has forgotten all about him. He isn't anybody."

"I see," said Mr. Evans reflectively. Then he added, "You see, he has a carpet in his room . . ."

"That isn't anything," Mr. Roker pronounced scornfully. "They had to put him somewhere, hadn't they? They just put him in the first empty room that came handy. There's no connection between him and the carpet."

" Ah," breathed Mr. Evans, still reflecting. " You say they don't know what to do with him."

" No. Johnson let it out." Mr. Roker chuckled a little maliciously. " He didn't mean to, because he's a good deal worried about it. He's had him there for weeks doing nothing and he daren't ask Blood about it, because he'd have to own up that he'd kept him so long without using him."

" I see," said Mr. Evans again. " He might be some use to me. I'll talk to Burnet about it."

" Well, what about lunch ? " Mr. Roker said briskly. And the two officials went out together to put their theories to the hard test of practice.

When Cyril returned a couple of hours later, his telephone bell rang as he entered the room. He deposited his stick and gloves on the desk and took up the instrument. The next moment he hastily put it down again. A voice had roared at him with positively stunning force, " This is Evans speaking," and under the influence of the shock he had just thrown the whole thing from him. Now to his amazement he perceived that the receiver rolling unheld on the table was still pouring out sounds with the force of a megaphone. " Hullo ! hullo ! " it vociferated. " Is that you, Hammond ? This is Evans speaking. Come down and see me at once, will you ? I want to speak to you."

Cyril could only breathe a " Yes, Mr. Evans " into the instrument. He did not touch the receiver to replace it until he felt certain that the dæmonic power of Mr. Evans's voice had ceased to inhabit it. Then he left the room and hurried downstairs.

As he went, some interior power informed him convincingly that the days of his leisure were over and that he was about to become an active and suffering member of the machine, to sit, perhaps, in a room with thirty or forty other persons, to answer telephones all day, to stay late in the evening, to interview terrifying personages. . . .

The information was remarkably correct. In the preceding half-hour Mr. Evans had interviewed Mr. Burnet, Mr. Burnet had interviewed Mr. Blood, Mr. Blood had interviewed (and castigated) Mr. Johnson, and Cyril had been transferred to Mr. Evans. Farewell then for ever to carpets and ease!

But when he entered Mr. Evans's room he found that once again his existence was forgotten, if only temporarily. Mr. Roker had entered a moment before him and was standing by Mr. Evans's side gazing with dumbfounded eyes and dropping jaw at a new phenomenon. Mr. Evans, in whom the first shock of surprise had passed but who had not yet readjusted his mental processes, was also gazing with mingled bewilderment and apprehension. Cyril followed the direction of their glances and was transfixed in his turn.

What they saw was the first appearance of a novelty which shocked their fixed ideas and was destined profoundly to affect their habits, a novelty whence were to spring many of the situations and crises with which, I hope, this story will be liberally bestrewn. Before them, outwardly serene and unconscious of their hypnotised stare, was the first woman clerk. She was sitting next to the elderly gentleman with side-whiskers, whom I have already described as a member of Mr. Evans's staff, and was learning what was needed in order that she might become his assistant.

"What was it you said these little notes were called?" she asked brightly. "Oh, yes, minutes. What a funny name to give them, isn't it?"

IX

If it was not in Mr. Burnet's nature to make any unnecessary effort, he still knew very well that a little activity applied early will sometimes save a world of pains later on. He had been prepared, he told himself, for changes being made as a result of war. He had not been astonished when the numbers of the staff increased. He had opposed the appointment of the first additional member—a boy clerk—merely as a matter of form. He even perceived that a man with power over ten subordinates might be made a Companion of the Bath when this honour was denied to a man with power over only five. He had been quite ready to give way, if only inch by inch, in a great many things which he recognised as inevitable.

But the flux of events was becoming too much for him. No one knew what he had suffered when the doddering but faithful and submissive old attendant, who had always answered his bell, was replaced by a pert young girl in pigtails and blue overalls. He had been informed of the change ; but when the substitute first appeared he had changed countenance and stammered. He had been obliged to repeat the muffled grunts in which he was accustomed to make his desires known ; and before the messenger's unruffled independence of attitude, he had lost his head and dismissed her, without conveying to her his meaning. As a result he had sat all afternoon with an empty ink-pot and his work had been entirely suspended.

He reflected gloomily, as he sat there without occupation, that this might be the beginning of the end. The confident and cheerful child, lately from the Sixth Standard of the Council School, had disconcerted him by not being afraid of him. He felt that she should have been systematically terrorised by persons who knew him well, before she was allowed to open his door. Surely the legend would have effected what his presence apparently could not. This had been the recognised procedure in the good old days ; and it had always worked well. But now this amazing infant would gossip with the other messengers ; and the rumour of his feebleness would spread. The legend would be dissipated for ever. Even Mr. Evans would realise that there was no longer anything in it. He would shake his head and say privately, " Poor old Burnet, he's past it. He's not the man he used to be ! " Nothing would remain that could be interposed between the harsh, alarming world and the shrinking, sensitive soul of the Assistant Director.

This terror passed. The messenger apparently did not gossip. She respected Mr. Burnet's secret, though she did not indulge him so far as to show any signs of deference or respect in his presence. He would look at her shamefacedly when she entered his room, as though there were some complicity between them ; and when he had to speak to her, he employed ingratiating tones, which suited him ill. She regarded him with an inscrutable expression and ran his errands, or neglected them, as the moment's whimsy took her.

Once he thought of an excellent plan for changing this state of affairs. He sent for Mr. Evans and, figuratively speaking, leapt at him as he appeared inside the door, caught him by the throat, banged his head against the wall and kicked him twice in the stomach. Then he made an excuse for summoning the messenger. As she came in, he (still figuratively) fetched Mr. Evans one over the ear and tweaked him by the nose, looking at the messenger as he did so, to see what effect it had on her. It had none. She surveyed him with serene tolerance, received his request for a copy of the current A.B.C., went out and refrained from bringing him what he had asked for. During the rest of the interview, he fancied that Mr. Evans must be wondering why he did not ring for the messenger again.

But this, though ever present and ever disquieting, was not the most serious of his griefs. The thought persistently rankled in his mind that he had been deceived; and it was rendered doubly bitter by the fact that he could not settle in his mind whom he ought to accuse of treachery. His tutor had begun it twenty-five years before by persuading him to spend that desolating year at the crammer's where no ink-pots were provided and where he, twenty-five years younger but equally averse from novelty, had suffered agonies with an unfamiliar and leaky fountain-pen. It was his tutor's idea that he should take the Civil Service examination; and his tutor had promised him in return a career of ample leisure, of unassailable dignity and of modest affluence. The crammer had taken his money and provided him with instruction (though not with ink), the examiners had placed him eleventh on the list, he had been offered, and had accepted, a position in the Circumlocution Office.

After two years in lodgings in Earl's Court, he had moved to comfortable rooms in the Temple; and, as soon as his salary warranted it, he had engaged a man-servant, thus perfecting his arrangements for the hurly-burly of life at the age of thirty-three. No one had ever drawn his attention to the possibility of a European war.

And now the income tax and the increase in the cost of living, he felt, had nearly done away with the affluence; and where was the leisure, where the dignity? Worst of all, to whom should he complain? His tutor, whose business it was to have foreseen this contretemps, was dead. He was obliged to own that the Government had never given him any guarantee against a European war. The words "leisure," "dignity" and "affluence" had not, in fact, been officially employed. Nevertheless, he continued to feel, like the discontented child at the party, that, if he had known there would be so many recitations and so little pastry, he wouldn't have come.

He endured, however, not willingly but without counteraction, the whips and arrows of the times; and some of his acquaintances were surprised by the eloquence and ferocity with which he denounced the statesmen of the Central Powers, especially when some unscrupulous move of theirs seemed likely to bring about a prolongation of the war. His invective departed even more strikingly from his pre-war standards of conversation when some incompetence of a Liberal member of the Government threatened to have the same effect. One member of his club was actually accustomed to quote him (though not in his presence) as a proof that the war had called forth the best qualities in the most unlikely men. " Look at Burnet," he would say. " A year ago you couldn't get a word out of him and now see how bright and chatty he is. The war has disturbed his habits more than those of any other man I know and yet see how his heart is in it."

Under the accumulating pressure of his miseries he began at last to lose his sense of direction and, with great unwisdom, to relax his firm clutch on what was familiar. The branch, he observed, was being filled with strange faces. Everybody nowadays seemed to discover and appoint curious persons who were by no means of the mandarin class but who were alleged to have been designed and executed by Heaven solely for the new jobs they were made to fill. And Mr. Burnet wondered if he too ought not to take a hand in this game.

X

So it happened that one day Mr. Burnet met in his club a florid and prosperous-seeming gentleman, whose cheerful face and greeting awoke dimly certain chords in his memory. After a few moments of gruff and halting conversation it came into his mind that this was no other than a stockbroker who had advised him on investments a matter of three years before. There followed on this identification very vividly in Mr. Burnet's mind the reminiscence that, acting on this gifted creature's advice, he had bought at twenty-three and sold at thirty-seven and five-eighths. The florid gentleman, perhaps I ought to explain, having been hammered on the Stock Exchange shortly before the outbreak of war, had recently witnessed with surprise and concern the disappearance of his wife's private fortune in what had seemed to be a promising attempt to manufacture high explosives out of seaweed; and ever since that really painful business of the experts' report he had been looking for Mr. Burnet, not ostentatiously but with a certain quiet persistence.

The appointment had been arranged without difficulty, though there had been a slight hitch about the payment of salary to Mr. Rowley; but it had been a failure from the first. The division which was placed under Mr. Rowley's charge could make nothing of him, nor did he seem to exert himself to make anything of it. And Mr. Roker, who had previously supervised the work and now found himself Mr. Rowley's second in command, had shown a very bad spirit. He made a practice of waiting for his chief's instructions: and when he received any he acted on them to the letter and when he received none he did nothing. He must have known, Mr. Burnet reflected angrily, that this could only lead to disaster; and it had been quite avoidable, for he had run the division with smoothness and success before Mr. Rowley's advent.

Mr. Rowley himself had behaved in a very odd way. On some occasions he had not come near the office for two or three days together; and neither the telephone nor wires from Mr. Burnet could draw any explanation from him. When he did come, it was not much before twelve o'clock; and he went out to lunch again punctually at one. Often he did not return until four, smoking a cigar, flushed in the face, and genial but vague in his manner.

Sometimes he brought back with him friends who resembled him to a surprising degree; and these would sit with him in his room, the sounds of their conversation scandalising all the officials who sat within earshot and quite undermining the discipline of his own staff.

During the whole of this episode, Mr. Roker preserved an impenetrable countenance whenever Mr. Burnet sent for him, a thing which happened more and more frequently as time went on, though never with any greater degree of success. He had referred this to Mr. Rowley for decision: Mr. Burnet would perhaps ask Mr. Rowley for information as to that: Mr. Rowley had said that he would himself attend to the other. Mr. Burnet got no change out of him, inwardly deplored his attitude and outwardly showed to him a coldness which affected Mr. Roker not at all. It was only Mr. Evans to whom Mr. Roker unbosomed himself with any freedom.

"It can't last much longer," he said, perching himself on the corner of Mr. Evans's desk and smiling down on the rotund features of his friend. "It can't last much longer. He'll burst soon enough."

And when Mr. Evans asked for details, he resumed: "The first week he was here I sent the letters into him every day for signature. Burnet told me to, and, anyway, I could see from the look of him that he wouldn't be here long. Well, he just took the letters and scribbled across each of them in blue pencil, 'I agree. W. R.'

"So the next day I had them all re-typed and sent them in again with the new ones. And the same thing happened again. By the end of the week it took two messengers to carry them all in and he stayed till nearly seven writing on each of them that he agreed."

"Didn't you try sending them in before lunch?" asked Mr. Evans.

"Not much," said Mr. Roker. "He might have signed them then. Well, at the end of the week I just signed them myself and put away all those that he'd scribbled on. They fill three drawers. And if Burnet wants to know why I sign the letters, I shall just bring them out."

Mr. Evans signified his approval of his friend's strategy by sage movements of his head.

"But just lately," Mr. Roker continued, "he's taken to drafting letters himself. And he always begins them, 'I am instructed by Mr. Secretary Smith to inform you . . .'" Mr. Evans remarked, "Oh, I say!" and looked very grave indeed. This was a formula reserved for letters of the highest importance to personages of the highest importance; and such letters could only be signed by Sir James Bootle, the Permanent Under-Secretary.

"I told him," Mr. Roker went on, "that Bootle ought to sign letters like that, and he only said in a muzzy sort of way: 'Bootle's an old friend of mine and I know he's badly overworked. I'm doing this to help him.'

"And yesterday he wrote a letter with the first paragraph beginning, 'I am instructed by Mr. Secretary Smith,' and the second beginning, 'At some future date, I shall be instructed by Mr. Secretary Smith . . .'"

"Good heavens!" cried Mr. Evans, who was seriously shocked. "Of course, you didn't let him send it."

"Yes," Mr. Roker replied, "bless you, I just let it go. He won't be here much longer."

And Mr. Roker's prophecy was fulfilled, though not before Mr. Burnet had been reduced almost to despair. He had borne in silence Mr. Rowley's irregularity of attendance and the chaos into which the work of the division was gradually falling; but he could not tolerate the ex-stockbroker's loud and vinous return to the office after lunch; and the breaking-point was reached when Mr. Rowley button-holed him in the lift one day with an objectionable hearty: "Well, Burnet, old fellow, and how's your show going? Raking in the dibs, eh?"

After this he determined on action; but his first attempt, which was to persuade Mr. Rowley to resign, was quite unsuccessful. Mr. Burnet was so tactful about it, that Mr. Rowley thought he was being complimented on the excellence of his work, returned thanks warmly and invited Mr. Burnet to dinner at the Iris Club, Soho, " to meet a couple of the best " and to go on elsewhere afterwards for a little flutter at " chemmy." Mr. Burnet then reluctantly indited a minute to the Director of Establishment, recommending that Mr. Rowley should be officially asked to resign, on the ground of his unsuitability for the work.

To this the Director of Establishment replied, asking very pertinently why Mr. Burnet now thought Mr. Rowley unsuitable, after having so strongly urged his appointment. Mr. Burnet, growing desperate, took his courage in both hands and answered that he advised Mr. Rowley's removal because he found him incompetent. Apparently the Director of Establishment considered this too difficult a matter for him to settle on his own responsibility and referred it to Sir James Bootle. Mr. Burnet received a friendly private note from the Permanent Under-Secretary, informing him that he " must really give some better reason, you know, for such a serious step as dismissing a man." Luckily, at this point, the absence of Mr. Rowley for twice his previous record of three days was followed by a letter from his widow, claiming a pension ; and Mr. Burnet, forwarding the letter to the Director of Establishment, breathed again.

XI

THE affair of Mr. Rowley, however, was not the least of the misfortunes which attended Mr. Burnet. The appointment of Mr. Pyeblew, he soon found, was an even more disastrous and a more enduring mistake.

He had taken up this young man as a result of considerable pressure. Mr. Blood offered him every time they met, with the persistence and the blandishments of a hair-dresser, officials in obscure posts in other Departments who, in spite of their brilliant talents and sound characters, could be had for the asking. Mr. Burnet was a stone-waller of an old tradition and of no mean individual quality; and in the year 1915, in Whitehall as in Flanders, the defensive was generally recognised to have the upper hand over the offensive. But he saw that he could not maintain his positions for ever without making a movement of some kind; and he began to fear that, unless he chose his assistant himself, he would find one day that an assistant had been provided for him whom he would not willingly have chosen.

He therefore began to make cautious inquiries among his acquaintances to discover if any of them knew of "a really safe man." Many of them averred that they did; but Mr. Burnet rightly distrusted the enthusiasm with which the head of the branch sometimes recommends one of his subordinates for transfer to another position. He made it clear, though in language of a more official tone, that he was not taking anybody's duds; and he refrained from following up any of the suggestions he received until Mortimer of the Board of Interference assured him that Pyeblew, who held a quite junior post in the obscure and backward Tramways Office, was precisely the man he needed.

An interview with Mr. Pyeblew confirmed him in his respect for Mortimer's judgment. There could surely be no malice in this short, stocky, bullet-headed young man, whose prominent brown eyes showed no slightest gleam of intelligence and whose short fringe regularly disposed round his forehead gave him an indescribable air of complete harmlessness. He seemed to show, Mr. Burnet thought, just the quantity and quality of enthusiasm that were to be desired, a sullen ardour for work, for work at all costs, regardless of its nature or its ultimate effect either on the public weal or Mr. Pyeblew's own career. His duties in the Staff Section of the Tramways Office, so it appeared, were confined to a fierce and unremitting scrutiny of the attendance books and overtime sheets kept in that Department and to such action as might naturally ensue therefrom. When Mr. Burnet told him that the official day for the clerical staff in the Circumvention Branch had been fixed at from nine in the morning until eight at night, there was almost a glint of fire in his eyes. He observed with a hungry expression that the Tramways Office had not been greatly affected by the war and was still working only from ten till five. When Mr. Burnet added that in cases of proved necessity it was not hard to get permission for an extension of the working hours he licked his lips and strove to brush back his intractable fringe as though he were already clearing his brain for action.

Mr. Burnet was very well satisfied. He summed up Mr. Pyeblew as unambitious, a glutton for work and fundamentally and satisfactorily stupid. Indeed the phrase which Mortimer had used, "a good, honest, hard-working moke," seemed to be completely justified. And what Mr. Burnet particularly liked was that Mr. Pyeblew had hardly said anything at all during the interview. He had nodded or shaken his head as occasion required and had emitted only just enough articulate syllables to prove himself capable of speech.

Mr. Burnet rejoiced and put in an application for his services couched in terms so glowing as to surprise Mr. Blood when it passed through his hands. The Director, however, though he could not guess whither this mood tended, did not withhold his endorsement. The Controller of Tramways made just enough difficulty about his consent not to alarm Mr. Burnet; and the matter was arranged.

Quite what happened after that Mr. Burnet never understood; but he felt like a man who has taken a kitten—and a rather stupid kitten, at that—into his house overnight and wakes in the morning to find it a full-grown tiger, imbued with the doctrines of strenuousness and efficiency. Some strange element in the atmosphere of the Circumvention Branch affected Mr. Pyeblew as it had never affected any man before. He expanded visibly like one of those Japanese toys which one drops into water so that one may watch them swell into lilies or roses.

After one breathless and panic-filled fortnight, during which he acted as Mr. Burnet's personal assistant, Mr. Pyeblew was hurried away to take charge of a division which happened to be going. It was, Mr. Burnet reckoned, one of the safest positions in which a wild man could be put. It dealt with the licensing and supervision of public statuary in England, Scotland and Wales, but not Berwick-on-Tweed. It was like putting him in a cage. It was the equivalent of a retiring post. Yet Mr. Pyeblew had hardly been there a week when he put forward a memorandum detailing the critical state into which the whole question of public statuary had arrived.

He prophesied imminent disaster unless immediate measures were taken, proposed a whole series of drastic new regulations under the Defence of the Realm Act, hinted darkly at the possible need of controlling all stone quarries and demanded forthwith a large addition to his staff.

Mr. Burnet could hardly take the affair seriously at first. He had shelved Mr. Pyeblew for ever. Why didn't the man realise that he had been shelved and conduct himself accordingly? He even reasoned with Mr. Pyeblew, saying:

"I don't think the case is proved, Pyeblew. I don't see that there's any necessity."

But Mr. Pyeblew walked up and down the room—a thing which Mr. Burnet hated—and said between his long strides:

"You don't understand the position, Burnet. We've a tremendous opportunity here. It isn't only the gravity of the position—I'm thinking of after the war." It was, of course, as much as Mr. Burnet could do to think of the war for more than two consecutive hours. When he had a momentary vision of post-bellum conditions, it showed him only a resumption of that agreeable existence out of which he was so rudely hoisted on August 4th, 1914. Mr. Pyeblew's point of view seemed to be quite different and he couldn't understand it and didn't in the least want to. He mendaciously promised that he would forward the memorandum, with his remarks, to the Director; and Mr. Pyeblew departed, appearing to be satisfied.

Mr. Burnet then locked the paper in one of his drawers and put the matter from his mind.

But a few weeks later, he realised abruptly that Mr. Pyeblew had been by no means put away with his proposals. The awakening came in the shape of a long neatly typed minute from that energetic official himself, which Mr. Burnet studied with attention. Gradually he gathered from it that Mr. Pyeblew had been making ready on his own account for the Great Push in advance of sanction; and that he had already largely increased his staff by getting into direct touch with the Director of Establishment. This was alarming enough in all conscience. It seemed very much to Mr. Burnet's way of thinking as though a schoolboy should run up a large account at the Stores in his father's name. But Mr. Pyeblew's effrontery exceeded even that. His latest move could only be compared to the same schoolboy turning to his father and complaining that the Stores would not supply him with the expensive luxuries for which he craved.

Mr. Pyeblew, it appeared, wanted a shorthand-typist; and even here, amazing as it might seem, the

Director of Establishment would have been willing to indulge him. But an unexpected obstacle had interposed itself. The Treasury, awakened from its slumbers some fifteen years after the introduction of stenography and typewriters into business offices, had fixed the rates of pay permissible for shorthand-typists at ten per cent below those then prevailing in the market and had washed its hands of the whole affair.

The Director of Establishment, in answer to Mr. Pyeblew's request, regretted that, owing partly, he thought, to this fact, there seemed to be no shorthand-typists available. He brought it to Mr. Pyeblew's notice that the Circumlocution Office had, in 1907, requested the Treasury to reconsider its decision and had met with a direct negative. He could see no prospect of doing any good by re-opening the matter now.

Mr. Pyeblew, in reply, had pointed out that he was in fact without a shorthand-typist, that he was obliged to draft his letters in longhand and that his work was suffering severely in consequence. He suggested that the Director of Establishment should go into the market and get him what he wanted at market-rates or, alternatively, should provide him with a Dictaphone. The Director of Establishment, while still professing anxiety to oblige, wrote with marked coldness, declining to entertain either of these propositions ; and he dropped into Mr. Runter's room on his way home to ask what a Dictaphone was. Mr. Runter thought it was an instrument used in German prison-camps for overhearing the conversations of the prisoners. This puzzled the Director of Establishment but did not affect his decision.

At this point Mr. Pyeblew, indefatigable but despairing, turned to Mr. Burnet for assistance, drafting in longhand a minute which was afterwards copied by his only typist, an elderly lady who manipulated her machine with two fingers and thought herself lucky to get the rate of pay which the Treasury allowed. Mr. Burnet meditated long over this document, when he had recovered from the shock, and towards the end of the fifth day after its receipt, he devised a masterstroke.

He put on the paper a minute in his own quite illegible script, which, if Mr. Pyeblew could have read it, would have proved to him (a) that he had no need of a shorthand-typist, (b) that he could easily get one at the recognised salary, (c) that owing to the universal lack of demand, shorthand-typists as a class had long ceased to exist. He added, as an afterthought, that he himself felt no need of a shorthand-typist. He considered this a decisive blow, as indeed it would have been in the happy days eighteen months before. But it was just at this time that Mr. Evans observed sagely to Cyril Hammond :

" You keep your eye on Pyeblew. He's a thruster."

XII

When Cyril first took up his labours in the Circumvention Branch, his family found his conversation rather vague, though it sprang evidently from a heart which was full of enthusiasm.

"But, dear," said his mother, towards the end of dinner, "I know you've told us a lot about it but I'm sure I don't in the least understand what it is you actually *do*." This was while Cyril was occupying his palatial room, which he had just been describing, and engaged upon duties which he found by no means so easy to describe.

He hesitated for a moment and then said, "Well, mother, of course you don't. You know perfectly well that you never could understand any sort of business."

"Perhaps not," interposed his father, reaching out for the port, "but I flatter myself that I do understand a good deal about business and I'm hanged if I can make out what you're up to. It's quite beyond me."

"He licks envelopes," said his sister indistinctly through the orange which she was mistakenly trying to consume in one mouthful.

Mrs. Hammond was distressed. "Lily, dear," she protested, "don't be silly. And I wish you would learn to behave properly at dinner. You ought to have quartered that orange. I'm sure it's those dreadful works . . ."

Cyril and his father let their glances meet, deep calling to deep across the shallows. "I've explained it all to you," Cyril said untruthfully, "but what you don't grasp, my dear father, is that a Government office is very different from a private office. Of course, you don't understand it. It's done in quite a different way."

"So it seems," his father snorted. "Ha! so it seems. But I tell you, my boy, that what you and your friends don't understand is that the country won't put up with that way of going on much longer. Now if you'll take my tip, Cyril——" He settled himself in his chair and directed his forefinger towards the top button of his son's waistcoat.

"Yes, father," Cyril replied, with commendable patience.

"If you'll take my tip, you'll go to this Mr. Blood and say—you must be quite modest about it, mind, you mustn't let him think you're too presumptuous."

"No, father," breathed Cyril softly.

"You'll say to him, 'Now look here, Mr. Blood, I come to all these questions with a perfectly fresh mind, I haven't got into a rut——'"

"Yes, father."

"And you can tell him too that your father's a man of business, you can say that I'm a director of several—hm—important companies, and that you have been brought up in a business atmosphere, added to which, mind you, you've had a proper University training—but I daresay he knows that?"

"Yes, father."

"Well—then you say to him: 'Now, look here, Mr. Blood, I'm sure you want to run this business as though it *were* a business. Can't I help? Can't we get out of the old ruts and into the new methods? Can't I help you to get a hustle on?' Do you see?"

"Yes, father."

"I'm sure that's the way to get on and to—er—er—er—be useful to your country. This is a young man's war, you must remember, Cyril, a young man's war. Only you mustn't let him think you're pushing yourself forward!"

"No, father."

"What I can't understand, Cyril," Lily interrupted, disposing of the orange, "is how you can sit in a wretched office all day, reading and writing horrid papers. Of course, it wasn't your fault that they wouldn't have you in the Army, but I'm sure you could have got a job in a munition works. The thing to do nowadays is to work with your hands." She was attending daily at a garage close by for the purpose of learning to drive a car, and she returned home every evening bearing with her great quantities of grease but nothing discernible in the way of information. "I daresay," she went on, "that if I spoke to Mr. Walker round at the shop he would find something for you. He's awfully nice."

"I'm sure Cyril ought not to waste his University education being a mechanic," their mother protested indignantly; but Cyril disdained to reply. Mr. Hammond considered it strange that his son should still not have received any pay after over a month's service; but he continued his allowance without complaint. Perhaps, he thought hopefully, Cyril would receive something quite surprising at the end of the quarter.

Though Cyril's mother continued not to understand how his day was spent, she nevertheless gave him all the sympathy of which she was capable and a good deal more than he deserved. It did not escape her, therefore, when a certain change came over his demeanour. He ceased quite suddenly to talk vaguely and at length about the office and the duties which he performed there. The name of Mr. Blood, hitherto a familiar theme, faded from his conversation. He spoke now of his work only in short reluctant sentences ; but when he spoke, there seemed to be more matter in what he said.

He had, in fact, left his leisurely and luxurious existence in a magnificent and magnificently carpeted apartment and had begun to work with real, if not very spontaneous, energy under the eye of Mr. Evans in a room occupied, and made slightly stuffy, by some twenty other persons. The first afternoon had been a surprising experience for him ; and it did not soon leave his memory.

When Mr. Roker had torn himself away to meditate in private on the appearance of the first woman clerk, Mr. Evans threw himself with energy into the business of utilising Cyril's talents. In the course of his inquiries, he had discovered that Cyril, though he was not entitled to a carpet in his room, was nevertheless a University man and so might have been, though he was not, a member of the Higher Division; and gratitude for the fact that this youth, who might have been his superior, was actually his subordinate, moved him to treat Cyril with marked gentleness. He led the novice to a secluded corner of the room, not far from his own point of vantage, and installed him at a table which was distinguished as much by its comfort as by its position. He also found for him the only chair in the room, besides his own, which had a cushioned seat, evicting an indignant boy clerk, who had quite illegally got possession of it. This done, he flung down on the table three large bundles of papers—more than Cyril had ever seen at once in the whole of his official career—and said cheerily :

" Summarise those, will you ? " Cyril turned over the confusing pages with dismay and was just beginning to be appalled by the magnitude of the task, when Mr. Evans loomed once more hugely over him, saying, " And write a letter to the Treasury on that. You'll see what you ought to say." Cyril looked at his watch. It was half-past three.

By half-past four he was going very heavily and his decks, so to speak, were under water with every third wave. It had been pretty plain work till he had stumbled on a dispute upon procedure between a gentleman mysteriously known as D.D.E. and another who preferred, with equal want of clarity, to be described as D.D.C.T. Cyril remembered with a slight thrill the penny bloods of his youth in which Government secret agents were always known under symbols rather than names. He recalled how B had got hold of the submarine plans in Odessa and how X3/02 had narrowly escaped being murdered in Turkestan ; and he was momentarily pleased to find himself in contact with these intriguing titans. But their relations with one another and with the Circumvention Branch remained obscure and grew still more obscure the more Cyril persisted in recognising two secret agents in the Director of Delays and Evasions and the Deputy Director of Controlled Tramways.

He was now completely fogged, his fingers were covered with ink and he was growing very tired. At that moment on the previous day he had been stretching and looking out of the window and counting the minutes to the time when his conscience should release him. Now he glanced round the room and saw nowhere any signs of departure. A more exacting power than conscience held him in fee ; and he could not tell how long it would hold him. He had known that conditions would be different here ; but how different ? It is said by criminologists that it is the indeterminate sentence which breaks the prisoner's heart.

At intervals, progressively decreasing in length, from half-past four to five, he looked round the room for gleams of hope ; but there were none. Twenty persons were working with the placid stolidity of those who have lost the habit of cessation. At ten minutes after five, his heart leapt wildly. Mr. Evans had risen from his desk and was reaching for his hat. Having taken it down, he called out to Cyril in his hearty voice :

"Are you coming out to tea, Hammond ? We always take a break in the middle of the afternoon here."

XIII

Mr. Evans had really not intended this invitation as a shock to Cyril but as a way of breaking him in gently to the hardships of his new life. As those difficult days went by, he showed himself a kind-hearted, if somewhat dogmatic, mentor. He began his charity by securing pay for Cyril; and he even, though this was an enterprise that might have daunted the stoutest heart, applied himself to getting the arrears. Had he not been able to bluff Mr. Bulge, at a carefully chosen moment, when that gentleman was alone in his room and more than usually distracted, into admissions damaging to Mr. Johnson and to himself, the feat would probably never have been accomplished. It was eventually accomplished at the cost of an interview between Mr. Bulge and Mr. Blood, as a result of which Mr. Bulge followed Mr. Wilson in the enjoyment of a severe nervous breakdown. This was rendered more remarkable by the fact that in this interview Mr. Blood refrained from expressing any opinion whatsoever: he merely asked questions. It proved, however, not without its utility to Mr. Bulge when, a couple of months later, he presented himself, pale and trembling, for enlistment under the Derby Scheme and was informed by the examining doctor that the Army was not a home for mental cases.

Mr. Evans also managed to protect Cyril against the cashiers, who evinced a desire to deduct from the arrears of pay the amount of income-tax which would be due for the whole year. In doing this, he expressed a conviction, which Cyril could hardly bring himself to share, that these hard-working officials received a substantial commission on all deductions made from salaries. But, though his accusations were baseless, his advocacy was successful; and he was further successful in persuading Cyril to buy a new hat with the proceeds. He thought this necessary if the tone of the branch was to be preserved.

During these first weeks, Mr. Evans gave up much valuable time to coaching Cyril, whom he regarded as a strange and interesting object of natural history hitherto unknown to him. He instructed him carefully in the eleven recognised but unofficial methods of disposing of inconvenient papers. (The first and most widely popular of these was unfortunately not practicable in Transatlantic Chambers, which was warmed throughout entirely by radiators.) He also showed him how to end an uncomfortable conversation on the telephone by replacing the receiver in the middle of a sentence and afterwards blaming the exchange; and he warned him that this device must not be practised too often on the same person.

He even made attempts to explore the private ambitions and mentality of his charge; and he was amused to find that Cyril meditated making a living by painting water-colour pictures of country scenes and, if opportunity served, by making etchings of cathedrals and similar objects. His amusement was tinged, though not altogether replaced, by respect, when he learnt that Cyril had once disposed for three guineas of a water-colour representing two cows and a haystack.

"What breed were they?" he inquired with interest, remarking that his father was a farmer and that he had been brought up in the country.

Cyril didn't know. He remembered that they were a sort of browny colour. Mr. Evans snorted.

"And how long did it take you to paint?" he asked.

Cyril estimated the total time expended at about four hours.

"Easy money!" cried Mr. Evans, doing calculations in his head on the basis of an eight-hour day, with one hour off for lunch. . . . And ever afterwards he regarded Cyril with just the quality of admiration which Mr. Herbert Spencer might have bestowed on the earning powers of Mr. George Robey.

Cyril, on his side, during the migrations from room to room on which Mr. Evans's staff embarked every month or so, received instruction humbly and with gratitude. He was beginning to feel a little less astray in this perplexing world; and sometimes when Mr. Evans and Mr. Roker held high conference together, on the merits of one of their colleagues or the proper place to lunch, he would venture a tentative opinion. He learnt the way to the Registry, how to get rid of an importunate caller and how to extract a paper from a branch which professed to have lost it.

Mr. Evans noted these signs of maturity with satisfaction and presently gave his pupil a mark of his approval.

It was after lunch on a chilly day of late autumn that he left his own seat and walked over to sit on the corner of Cyril's desk. Cyril looked up and lifted his sluggish pen from the paper.

"Don't take any notice of me," said Mr. Evans kindly, puffing at his pipe, which rattled bronchially. "Go on with what you're doing." Cyril obediently continued; but presently Mr. Evans remarked, "I've got a new job for you, Hammond."

Cyril forbore from cheering without the internal struggle which perplexed the ranks of Tuscany; and Mr. Evans went on in a hushed and mysterious voice:

"You mustn't let out to anyone what I'm going to tell you." Cyril promised that he would not. "It's very confidential at present." Cyril betrayed a slightly greater interest.

"You see," said Mr. Evans, bending still lower towards Cyril's ear, "a lot of men are going to be released from the office for the Army. Now Blood's given me the job of making the list of them and I am going to put you on to it. Now the first thing you have to do is to get on to D.E.2 and ask them to send us the proper forms. Ring up the main office and do that now."

"Yes," said Cyril. "What's D.E.2?"

"Director of Establishment, of course," replied Mr. Evans, leaving him. "Now get on with it at once."

Cyril took the telephone, which had grown no dearer to him with greater familiarity, and succeeded in getting through to the Circumlocution Office. He asked for D.E.2.

"Who do you want in D.E.2?" asked the operator, pertinently if ungrammatically.

"I don't know," Cyril replied, rather weakly. "Hold on and I'll find out." He went and asked Mr. Evans, who thought that he had better try Baines;

and when he got back to the telephone, he found that the main office had rung off. Exercising great patience, he got through again and asked for Mr. Baines of D.E.2.

" Who ? " said the operator.

" Mr. Baines ! " shouted Cyril fiercely.

" Wait a minute," the operator replied, " and I'll find out." Cyril waited for five minutes with the telephone glued uncomfortably to his ear. At the end of that time, the operator returned and said :

" Who was the gentleman you were asking for ? "

" Mr. Baines," Cyril sighed.

" There's no gentleman of that name here."

" Oh, yes, there is," Cyril answered plaintively. " Mr. Baines of D.E.2."

" Wait a minute," said the operator, " and I'll find out." Cyril waited for five minutes with the telephone glued uncomfortably to his ear. At the end of that time, the operator returned and said :

" What branch did you say the gentleman was in ? "

" D.E.2 "—softly, sadly, pathetically, the murmur of a soul in limbo, settling down and getting used to it.

" Oh, they left this building a long time ago," said the operator. " They left in April."

" Where did they go to ? "

" Transatlantic Chambers."

" This *is* Transatlantic Chambers," observed Cyril bitterly.

" Then what do you want to ring me up for ? " asked the operator.

Cyril ignored this very just inquiry. " What's the number of their room here ? " he asked. The operator thought it was Twenty-one ; and Cyril banged back the receiver without thanking her. He then set out to find Mr. Baines and, as he passed Mr. Evans, he remarked in a tone of restrained annoyance :

" You'll be glad to know that D.E.2 have been in this building all the time."

" I am," said Mr. Evans, and let him get as far as the door. Then he called him back and said :

" Where are you going to ? "

" I am going to look for D.E.2."

" What's the number of the room you are going to ? "

" Twenty-one," Cyril answered shortly and impatiently.

" Then don't go any further," observed Mr. Evans, in a tone of deep satisfaction. " You'd only have to come back. This *is* Room Twenty-one." Cyril sat down on the chair placed for Mr. Evans's callers and looked as if he were going to cry.

" It's like you, isn't it," Mr. Evans went on, regarding him in a tolerant manner, " not to know the number of the room you sit in yourself ? But cheer up. I'd quite forgotten, but I remember now. They *were* over here for a little while. They had this room ; but they went away in August, just before we moved in."

" And where did they go to ? " Cyril asked, trying to keep all traces of emotion out of his voice.

" The Pan-Anglican Hotel." Re-examined, Mr. Evans was still sure that they had gone to the Pan-Anglican Hotel. " You ring up the Pan-Anglican," he said cheerily, " and ask for Baines."

Exercising great patience, Cyril rang up the Pan-

Anglican Hotel. When he had got through a voice at the other end said with crisp promptitude :

" Ministry of Housing ! "

" I beg your pardon ? " said Cyril.

" I said, Ministry of Housing," the voice answered tartly.

" But you can't be," Cyril protested, somewhat bewildered. " You're part of the Circumlocution Office."

" Well, if you know what I am better than I do, perhaps you'll come and do my job," the voice rejoined, apparently growing angry. " I'm sure I don't care what office I belong to, but as it happens this is the Ministry of Housing."

" I'm very sorry," said Cyril, " but I thought—I was told that there was a branch of the Circumlocution Office there. Are you sure there isn't a branch there called D.E.2 ? "

" Wait a minute," said the operator, " and I'll find out." Cyril waited five minutes in great discomfort ; and the perspiration ran off his forehead and splashed heavily on the blotting-paper in front of him. At the end of that time, the operator returned and said :

" Hullo ! are you there ? Hullo ! "

" Yes," said Cyril.

" What was the name of the branch you were asking for ? "

" D.E.2," said Cyril.

" Well, there was a branch of that name here some time ago, but they've gone away."

" Where have they gone then ? " Cyril asked, more by way of rounding off the conversation than in the hope of getting any information.

"Back to the Circumlocution Office."

Cyril rang off, drew three circles on his blotting-pad, elaborated them into a rough diagram of the contours of Mr. Evans and thoughtfully contemplated the result. Then, spurred by the reflection that in some measure the recruitment of the Army depended on him, he took up the telephone again. As he did so, he reminded himself that it was worse in the trenches, but his common sense rejected the incitement; and it was in a spirit of pure self-devotion that he persisted in getting through again to the main office.

The operator who had greeted him was the same who had done so before; and, though he did not really like her, he used in speaking the warmth he would have shown to an old friend. He explained the position to her as clearly as he could, considering the fact that he was getting a little hoarse; and when he had finished, she said:

"Wait a minute and I'll find out."

Cyril waited. When she returned, she had, much to his surprise, thought of an entirely new remark.

"Would you like," she suggested, "to speak to someone in D.E.1? Perhaps they could help you."

"It would be better than nothing," Cyril agreed. While far from despising them as a class, he was beginning to grow a little tired of the conversational graces of telephone operators; and he waited with almost pleasurable anticipation while she selected a suitable victim. After a considerable time had elapsed, a voice shouted suddenly and angrily in his ear:

" Hullo ! Yes ! What is it ? Who is that ? Hullo ! "

" I wanted to speak to Mr. Baines of D.E.2," Cyril began, as soon as the voice gave him a chance.

" Well, you've got the wrong number. This is Jones of D.E.1." And an unmistakable click informed Cyril that their interchange of views was untimely at an end. He looked round him haggardly and then reflected that to give in now would be an unworthy representation in miniature of a premature peace. He got through to the Circumlocution Office again and made the acquaintance of a new operator, to whom he explained that, when he was cut off, he had been talking to a gentleman in D.E.1, whose name, he thought, was Jones.

" Wait a minute," she said, " and I'll find out." When she had done so, it was his good fortune to light upon Mr. Jones in a more genial mood. What he did not know was that on the previous occasion he had been unlucky enough to interrupt an argument between Mr. Jones and a very stubborn woman clerk—Mr. Jones protesting that he had already paid his tea-money that week and the woman clerk reiterating her demand for one and twopence, without meeting his defence. In the interval Mr. Jones had been fortunate enough to discover the receipt among the enclosures of a letter that was being sent to the Office of Works and had triumphed. He consequently received Cyril like a friend, listened to his story and then remarked in a cheerful tone :

" Looking for D.E.2, are you ? Which do you want, D.E.2a or D.E.2b ? "

"Wait a minute," said Cyril wildly, "and I'll——"

"All right," Mr. Jones interrupted. "What's the name of the man you want?"

"Baines," Cyril answered with relief.

"Ah, Baines! Well, D.E.2 has ceased to exist." Cyril gasped involuntarily. "D.E.2a has amalgamated with this branch and D.E.2b, which is Baines's lot, has been transferred to the new D.I."

"D.I.?" asked Cyril.

"Yes, Directorate of Eyewash, some people call them, but officially it's the Directorate of Inquiries."

"And where are they?" Cyril asked.

"Oh, they moved to-day. Now, let me see, where have they gone to? Oh, yes, I know. They've gone to Transatlantic Chambers. Do you know where that is?"

"My God, yes!" Cyril exclaimed, as he rang off. Then he got into communication with the Transatlantic Chambers switchboard, and asked for Mr. Baines of D.I. The operator replied that she had never heard of him or of his branch.

"Oh, yes," said Cyril confidently. "They moved in to-day."

"Wait a minute," said the operator, "and I'll find out." When she returned at the end of five minutes, she went on, "Yes, they did move in to-day, but their telephones aren't in working order yet. Sorry!"

"Not at all," said Cyril, as he rang off.

The afternoon was now wearing on. Mr Evans had come back from tea; and some of the more frivolous spirits were already beginning to think about going home. Cyril crept out into the corridor and found there a messenger-girl, whom he knew, standing with a kettle in her hand, chatting to one of her colleagues. When he had succeeded in attracting her attention to his necessities, she rewarded him with a vague report that somebody or other had been moving into the ninth floor all day.

"And a nice fuss they've made," she said to her friend, as Cyril started on his mountainous journey, "with their chairs and tables and all in the lift and us having to tramp up and down from the first floor to the hall with the letters."

On the ninth floor Cyril discovered a good deal of straw, some packing-cases and a broken desk. But the rooms were dark and deserted. Peering here and there among them, he found at last a young man crawling on all fours over a floor that was littered with papers. On Cyril's approach the young man looked up without otherwise changing his position and said in a complaining voice:

"I can't find my key anywhere. I locked up my desk so that it should be safe in the move and now I can't find the key anywhere."

"And is there something important in the desk?" Cyril asked sympathetically.

"Yes," said the young man, "my pipe. I can't go home without my pipe."

"Well," said Cyril, whose concern for other people's troubles was at this moment strictly limited, "I'm looking for Baines. Can you tell me which is his room?"

"Yes," the young man answered, crawling further away, "this is his room but he's gone home. He

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says it's no use trying to work until the telephone's put in, and I agree with him. I'd have gone home myself if I could find my key. I wonder whether I could have dropped it in Baines's ink-well ?" He began investigating a heap of miscellaneous and dusty objects which lay in a corner.

"Oh, hell !" said Cyril in a dull voice, and turned to leave the room. As he was going out, the young man called after him :

"I say, what did you want to see Baines about ?"

"Oh," Cyril replied, "only to get some forms for the release of men for the Army."

"Then it doesn't matter his having gone," the young man remarked cheerfully. "He isn't doing that job any more. The man you want is Jones of D.E.1."

XIV

Cyril's own encounter with the Army's hunger for men was brief and sufficient. It seemed to him, in its long preparation and abrupt dénouement, to resemble one of Bombardier Wells's less fortunate appearances in the ring.

"My dear young friend," said the hot and hurried doctor, dropping his stethoscope with an alarming clatter, after a cursory inspection of Cyril, "*what* was it you said you came for ?"

"To enlist," Cyril answered sulkily, shifting with an uneasy movement from foot to foot and feeling that the costume of a Greek athlete was unbecoming to him.

"And what on earth made you do that ?" the doctor asked.

"Well, you see," Cyril replied, "I had a letter from Lord Derby . . ."

"Yes, I know," growled the doctor. "Well, you've come at the wrong time. My surgery hours are from five to seven ; but I doubt if I can really do anything for you. Now hurry up, do, and get dressed and get away before you slip down one of the cracks in the floor."

"You haven't tested my eyes yet," Cyril complained.

"No, and I'm not going to," said the doctor brutally. "Off with you !" Cyril therefore returned to Transatlantic Chambers, sat down in his usual seat and entered his own name on a nice new form.

" I suppose you passed all right ? " he asked, when his chief returned.

Mr. Evans replied briefly that he had indeed passed; and under examination he vouchsafed the further fact that the doctor backed an energetic sergeant-major to take three stone off him in a week.

" Question which of you would fade away first," Cyril commented ; and then, after reflection, he asked suddenly, " Who'll get your job ? "

" I don't know. Would you like it ? " Mr. Evans questioned blandly. " But I don't suppose I'm going for a little while yet."

" Wouldn't you like to go ? " Cyril persisted, fixing the innocent blankness of his round glasses on Mr. Evans's contented face.

" I shouldn't mind," Mr. Evans replied, " if only they'd take Roker at the same time. I shouldn't like to leave Roker behind me."

" I wonder whether he's passed," said Cyril, speculating. " He looks healthy enough."

" Oh, yes," Mr. Evans declared, " he's *healthy* enough but he won't have passed. You can lay all you've got on that."

" Why not ? "

" He's too cunning," Mr. Evans replied. " You can trust him not to get passed if he doesn't want to. He's cunning enough to get round all the doctors in London. He could wangle the hind leg off a mule." Just as he was delivering this opinion, Mr. Roker appeared in the door, wearing as always the jaunty smile that sat on his long countenance like an orchid in the button-hole of an undertaker.

"Hullo, Roker," cried Mr. Evans, "what luck?"

"What would you think?" Mr. Roker asked, as he moved towards them.

"Rejected, I should imagine," said Mr. Evans, with a sigh.

"Wrong again," Mr. Roker informed him, rubbing his hands together. "Generally wrong, aren't you, Evans? Passed with honours, I assure you. First-class life."

"Then what are you looking so cheerful about?" Mr. Evans demanded.

"Oh, what does it matter?" said Mr. Roker. "It's just a formality, a pure waste of time. They know well enough that they can't get along without me. Why, bless you, I've got half my cases in such a position that no one else could do anything with them at all, let alone bring them out successfully. I'm quite safe."

"Well, that's as may be," Mr. Evans observed. "But I'm jolly glad you met a doctor who was a bit cleverer than you are. He must have had a tough time with you."

"He never let me say a word," exclaimed Mr. Roker, momentarily betraying his annoyance.

"Good for him," Mr. Evans applauded. "It was about his only chance. How many are going to be taken from your division?"

"Oh, I might let them have a boy clerk or two," said Mr. Roker negligently. "There are some I don't want."

"But what about all those barristers of yours?"

"Oh, they're not going. No such luck." And again

Mr. Roker allowed it to be seen that there were forces which even he could not control. " Their fathers and mothers and uncles and aunts and cousins will see to that, all right. If they did go, I should begin to think there was something in it. But you take my word for it, there isn't. Nobody's going to be released, at least not to signify." And upon this magisterial pronouncement, Mr. Roker left them.

Mr. Pyeblew, however, regarded the future with far less tranquillity of spirit. Cyril sent him the prescribed forms to be filled up for the members of the staff ; and the result was a human tornado which descended abruptly on Mr. Evans.

" I don't know what all this means," Mr. Pyeblew shouted furiously, waving a sheaf of forms in Mr. Evans's concerned countenance. " You ask me how many of my staff I desire to retain ? "

" That's what it says," Mr. Evans replied cautiously.

" That *is* what it says. Well, understand that I cannot in any circumstances release any of my staff. It would be absolutely impossible."

" Yes, Mr. Pyeblew," said Mr. Evans. " . . . You see, I didn't draw up the form."

" I can't help that," said Mr. Pyeblew. " I don't care who drew up the form. The point is that I will not have my staff interfered with." And he thumped heavily on Mr. Evans's desk, so that the ink-wells rattled and the glue-pot was upset.

" Yes, Mr. Pyeblew," said Mr. Evans, trying unobtrusively to mop up the glue with the afternoon post. " I suppose, of course, that you *could* substitute women in *some* cases ? "

"No," Mr. Pyeblew roared. "If I can get any intelligent women, which seems improbable because there aren't any, and I shouldn't be allowed to pay them a living wage if there were—if I can get any, I want them as additions, not as substitutes. My work is increasing and it must not be hampered by this kind of interference."

"No, Mr. Pyeblew," murmured Mr. Evans. He was distracted by the discovery that the glue had begun to drip off the table on to his trousers; but he dared not move under the glare of that arresting eye.

"Very well, then," said Mr. Pyeblew, slightly mollified. "You will see that none of my staff are troubled about the matter?"

"Yes, Mr. Pyeblew," Mr. Evans said, with some ambiguity. He explained to Cyril, when the sky was clear again, that so long as people were as easily satisfied as that, it seemed better not to argue. Mr. Burnet dealt with these matters and would doubtless deal with Mr. Pyeblew. "But he's a thruster, isn't he?" he concluded, with a touch of wistful admiration.

Not many minutes had gone by after this, when a beautifully dressed young man entered the room with a curious air of not very confident arrogance and remarked into the atmosphere:

"Er—I want—er—to speak to Mr. Evans."

"I'm him," said Mr. Evans, to whose trousers a piece of blotting-paper had firmly adhered as a result of his misguided efforts to get rid of the glue. He was endeavouring to get rid of this decoration with a penknife; and as he sat with his head bent down in an uncomfortable attitude, his face grew redder and redder and the veins in his temples swelled alarmingly.

"Er—ah—yes," said the young man, leaning in a graceful attitude on the desk, as though to superintend operations.

"Well?" growled Mr. Evans in an uninviting tone.

"My name is Willoughby, Room 303," the young man continued. But Mr. Evans had now cut a small hole in his trousers and was annoyed; and Mr. Willoughby was obliged to go on without encouragement. "My telephone has gone wrong," he said rather weakly, "and I thought—I was told—that you were the right man . . ." His voice trailed away into an abashed silence under the hostile stare with which Mr. Evans, lifting his head, regarded him.

"Who told you that?" asked Mr. Evans, with incredulous emphasis on each word.

"Oh, *they* told me — I'm sorry . . ." Mr. Willoughby designated a vague source of information with a sweep of his hand. "Then you're not the right man?"

"I shouldn't have thought anyone here was fool enough to tell you I had anything to do with telephones," Mr. Evans grumbled, sinking into his former position and scraping away like a demented paper-hanger stripping a room on a piece-work rate.

"Oh, I'm sorry . . . I must try someone else . . ." But Mr. Willoughby still lingered gazing at Mr. Evans and apparently desiring to prolong the conversation. After a few moments he began again, with an elaborate affectation of carelessness, looking round in the vain hope that no one else was listening to him.

"As I'm here, something else occurs to me that perhaps you can tell me about. . . . It's—er—about this recruiting business. I went yesterday and volunteered for the Army. . . ."

"You'd have lost your job if you hadn't," Mr. Evans interrupted thickly. "Secretary of State's instructions."

The young man seemed to think this an unnecessary remark. "At any rate," he said in a pained voice, "I volunteered and I was accepted. I was actually accepted—most surprising thing that ever happened!"

"Second most surprising," mumbled Mr. Evans, his voice lost among the capacious folds of his waistcoat; and Cyril fancied he caught the additional remark, "Most surprising that anything should have got him near the Army."

Whatever it may have been, the young man preferred to disregard it and continued: "My doctor was astonished when he heard of it, but, of course, I wouldn't let him write to the War Office. But the point is now—how do I stand?"

Mr. Evans raised his head again and looked Mr. Willoughby straight in the face. "How do you stand?" he repeated in a reserved and official but slightly hostile voice. "How do you stand? Why, that depends on when your group is called up. I hear they're going to be called up very soon."

"But—er—do you really think I shall be called up with my group?"

"Why not?"

"But do you think the Department will be willing to release me?"

"I cannot, of course, speak in the name of the Department," said Mr. Evans, in an excellent parody of his own official manner towards an unimportant member of the public, "nor can I—hrm—commit it to any definite line of policy. But there is no reason—hrm—why you should not draw your own conclusions from what I have said."

"But—but—don't you think there will be some delay—some extension of time?"

"I am, of course, not in a position——" Mr. Evans began, growing more and more majestical as the situation developed. But the young man had heard that before and thought the matter had advanced beyond phraseology on either side.

"Do you mean," he demanded urgently, "that I shall be called up at once?"

Mr. Evans beamed on him with affable condescension. "While I cannot say," he observed, "that a decision has yet been reached in your case, I am of opinion—hrm—that you should be ready to take up your duties in—hrm—another sphere of national service." He was largely quoting from a stock letter that Cyril had drafted under his direction; but the young man didn't know this and wouldn't have been much happier with the knowledge.

"But you see," he pleaded, "perhaps you don't know but mine is undoubtedly a special case." (Later on, Mr. Willoughby and others learnt to discard this form of words, which acquired a more fatal ring as the teeth of the comb grew closer together.) "There is my sister and her two children——"

"Your sister a widow?" asked Mr. Evans sharply.

"No," said Mr. Willoughby, warming to his case, "but her husband has been at the front, don't you see, since August, 1914, and, of course, if anything were to happen to him——"

"Ah, that," said Mr. Evans, wagging a finger, "*that* is naturally a matter for the new Local Tribunals that are being set up. You will have to lodge an appeal with them."

"And," Mr. Willoughby suggested, brightening a little, "no doubt the Department will certify that I am discharging important duties here and will support my appeal?"

"That," Mr. Evans pronounced, with an air of triumphant finality, "has been definitely forbidden by the Secretary of State."

"Oh, dear!" exclaimed Mr. Willoughby, apparently completely unmanned.

"And in any case," Mr. Evans resumed, "it isn't the slightest good coming and talking to me about it. I've nothing whatever to do with exemptions or releases."

"I beg your pardon?" said Mr. Willoughby.

"I'm only preparing a list of men of military age," Mr. Evans explained. "I've no more to do with what becomes of them than I have with—with telephones. Good morning." He turned to Cyril as Mr. Willoughby indignantly took his departure and observed with a chuckle, "I wonder how many more of them we're going to have."

One particularly, in the crowd that followed, lingered in Cyril's memory. It was a bowed and shrivelled figure with timid sunken eyes hidden behind great round spectacles; and its face was lined and what hair it had left was beginning to go grey. This pathetic object sidled up to Mr. Evans's table and said, after coughing once or twice apologetically:

"My name is Weeks." Mr. Evans accepted the news-item with a grunt. "I'm in the Correspondence Room and I came to see if you could tell me anything about this recruiting instruction that's been sent round. Have I really got to attest?"

"I'm afraid that's what it means," said Mr. Evans, looking at him with pity.

"But, you know, though I hardly like to say it, mine *is* rather a special case. My wife is ill and so are three of the children, and the seventh isn't old enough yet to look after itself, and my mother, who lives with us, has been bed-ridden for years, and my sister is dependent on me and, of course, there's the mortgage on the house—— Do you think there's any chance of my being kept?"

"Well, I should think you ought to be," said Mr. Evans, veiling his emotions. "What job are you on?"

"Well, I'm afraid it's nothing very important," said Mr. Weeks in his thin, high, hesitating voice. "I make myself as useful as I can. I—I answer the telephone and look up addresses in the Directory and—and—*do* you think there's any chance of my being kept?"

"Oh, bless you, you'll be all right," replied Mr. Evans, in his heartiest manner, conscious of performing a virtuous action in thus cheering the unfortunate. And Mr. Weeks went away comforted.

In due time—to be precise, on a Monday morning—

Mr. Burnet, who had been closeted on many occasions with Mr. Blood and had even been summoned into the presence of the Secretary of State, sent for Mr. Evans and warned him with a sort of sepulchral brusqueness, that the branch must be prepared for grave sacrifices. It must also be prepared to work as it had never worked before, so that the loss of those who were going might be felt as little as possible. By way of preparing for the emergency, he intended himself to take over one of Mr. Evans's ablest clerks to answer his telephone and, in exchange, so it seemed, to present Mr. Evans with three entirely new jobs. Mr. Evans was naturally a little depressed by the purport of this conversation as it affected himself. But he found a certain compensation in the fact that he was able to curdle the blood of his cronies by pictures of a decimated branch. He devoted himself with assiduity to extracting from the situation all the possibilities of compensation that it afforded.

On Tuesday afternoon it was made known that Egbert Williams, Assistant Clerk in Mr. Pyeblew's division, would be released at once and Jonathan Weeks, temporary clerk in the Correspondence Room, as soon as his group was called up. And the Circumvention Branch heaved a deep sigh, dipped its pens in the ink and got on with the war.

XV

DURING the summer of 1916 Cyril shared with Mr. Evans and a large majority of the population of England, excluding Lord Northcliffe and Mr. Lloyd George, the delusion that the poor old war was on its last legs. That certainty spread through the office; and Mr. Burnet engaged himself, in private and visionary moments, in drawing up a scheme for the instant dismissal of all the temporary staff. Mr. Evans wondered whether he would revert to his former status and rate of pay and rather thought that he would. Cyril wondered what would become of him and whether his father would be willing to begin again the payment of an allowance which his unexpected salary had superseded. Mr. Blood, in his inmost thoughts, agreed with the reported exclamation of a leader of one of the smaller nations, that life would be exceedingly dull when the struggle was over.

But Cyril, youthful and careless of all but the passing moment, was visited perhaps less by anxiety than the rest. Life seemed very vivid and varied to him when he could profit every day by the discourses of Mr. Evans and Mr. Roker. Mr. Evans's philosophy was precisely formulated on nearly every point that Cyril's curiosity could raise; and he offered to Cyril Whitehall as a mirror of the world. In his opinion, if you were a member of the Higher Division, that was enough and no further effort was required. You passed through a caterpillar stage at the University, a chrysalis stage at the crammer's, a brief and painful bursting of the case in the examination-rooms, and then you emerged, a happy butterfly in top-hat and morning-coat, ready to flit from office to office down the length of Whitehall, extracting honey from each. It was like the solid and permanent fortune which attends a man who has the sense to be born the only son of a rich peer. But if you were not a member of the Higher Division, you needed desperately both luck and cunning.

" It's a hard life," Mr. Evans sighed to Cyril, after they had lunched. " Before the war I wasn't earning my pay and I was always afraid someone would find it out. The week before the war began I wrote on a paper, ' Ask Home Office when an answer to our letter of January 12th may be expected.' Reasonable, you'd say, wouldn't you ? Well, I had the nerve to sign that myself instead of passing it up for authority. It was all the work I'd had to do for three days and I didn't want to share it with anyone else. Well, I got a proper jacketing for that, I can tell you, from Burnet himself. He talked to me for ten minutes about my dangerous irresponsibility and excess of zeal. Zeal ! "

Cyril murmured something sympathetic in reply.

" It's not, mark you," Mr. Evans continued, " that I'm a man for work. I'm not. I like a comfortable life. Ten to four, and come half an hour late and go half an hour early, suits me very well. I'd never grumble at that. But an active man wants *something* to occupy his mind while he's sitting in an office. I don't know if you've noticed that you can't play noughts and crosses right hand against left ? Every game is drawn, unless you're a born fool. Of course, old Bentham used to have a rare exciting time with it; and when his right hand was two and ninepence up he took us all out and stood us drinks. But what I mean is that it makes me fairly miserable to see all this work simply running to waste. We get through in a day now what we could have made last for weeks in the old times, and not get tired of it either. Why, bless you, I've settled things myself on the telephone that Burnet would have written fourteen pages of minutes about and held a conference on and then referred it to the Secretary of State before deciding."

"But if you saw a chance of a big job and lots of money," Cyril asked him, rolling the words round his tongue, "wouldn't you feel inclined to hustle then?"

"I don't know what it feels like to see a chance like that," observed Mr. Evans gloomily. "But I tell you, all I'd ask for really would be to get into the Higher Division and get a safe job where I could see my screw going steadily up to a thousand and make some Second Division man do all the work except signing the letters. I don't want anything more than that. I'm a quiet man."

He paused and Cyril complimented him on the modesty of his desires, adding that he surely might look forward to promotion to the Higher Division as a reward for his services in the war.

"Are you pulling my leg?" Mr. Evans asked cautiously. "Or are you just playing up for an afternoon off? Because it's no good your trying either. No, I shan't ever get into the Higher Division. You need cunning for that. I'm not cunning enough. Roker may stand a chance, but I don't." And with a magnanimous enthusiasm he began to enlarge on the bold and unfailing astuteness of Mr. Roker.

"I'll give you an instance," he said, warming to his theme. "You know, before Roker came here, he was in the Colonial Office, and when he first joined there years ago they thought no end of a lot of him. They put him on to drafting answers to Parliamentary questions; and he was just the man for the job. He was sublime. There wasn't a fact you can think of he couldn't get round—except one, and that was the time he came to the office in the morning. You couldn't make him come within an hour of the proper time. No one minded half an hour, but an hour was a different matter. Well, at the end of every month the attendance books were sent to the Permanent Under-Secretary's branch to be examined; and when three months running they found that Roker was an hour or so late every day there was a terrific rumpus. The Permanent Under-Secretary sent for him and crushed him, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary sent for him and slew him, the Secretary of State sent for him and destroyed him and the Deputy-Assistant Bottle-washer, who keeps the ink-pots full, sent for him and simply annihilated him. And, of course, Roker's immediate chief swept up the bits and buried them in quicklime. They did the thing in style, I can tell you." Here Mr. Evans paused and looked round thoughtfully.

"There he is, the devil," he said, a jovial gleam playing over his features. "He's persuaded the waiter to get him the jammiest part of the jam roll, I'll bet." He waved cheerfully across the room; and Cyril, also looking up, saw Mr. Roker acknowledge the greeting by flourishing a fork, without interrupting what seemed to be a highly satisfactory process of deglutition.

"Well," Mr. Evans resumed, "Roker did what he could. He apologised and promised that he'd be punctual in future. And they all told him that if he didn't pull himself together at once he'd get a really severe reprimand the next time and very likely be docked of a year's increment. But towards the end of the next month, Roker began to realise that his page in the attendance book wasn't all that it might have been. The best he'd scored was a ten-forty on the first morning, and after that there were more eleven-fifteens than he cared to think about. And so, as oughtn't in the least to surprise you, when the time came to send that book up for inspection again, there wasn't any book. It had been there in the morning, but it wasn't there in the afternoon. Well, they searched everywhere for it, and they took particular care to turn out Roker's desk and look at every place he'd been near all day. But they couldn't find it. So at last they made the proper apologies and started a new book; and Roker, like a sensible man, got married and took to coming to the office not more than half an hour late. I don't say, mind you, that it wasn't a rather desperate step; but he had to do something or lose his job. Then a little while after that he got himself transferred to the Circumlocution Office—— He's coming over here," he interrupted himself, "and he always denies the end of the story. Oh, no, it's all right, he's asking the waiter to take a penny stamp instead of a tip."

"Well," he went on, "after he'd gone, and more than twelve months after the book had been lost, a letter came to the Colonial Office from the Governor of the Mingo Islands, where the mail-steamer touches only once a year. What the Governor said was that with the official despatches that came by the last mail there had been a large book, partly filled up and labelled 'Attendance'; and, as the despatches contained no instructions referring to it, he was uncertain what use it was intended he should make of it. That's a true story," he added, as Mr. Roker sat down at their table, "and if you knew Roker as well as I do, you wouldn't think of disbelieving it for a moment."

Mr. Roker superbly disregarded the challenge thus presented to him. He called for the waiter and, before ordering coffee, drew his attention to the fact that he had already lunched at another waiter's table and did not regard himself as incurring any liability for a second tip. He then abstracted a fill of tobacco from Mr. Evans's pouch and would have laid hands on Cyril's matches, had not Cyril anticipated him by hastily thrusting the box into his pocket.

"Can you give me a match, Hammond?" Mr. Roker asked smoothly. "I forgot to bring mine out with me."

"I haven't got any. I'm sorry," Cyril answered, with composure. Mr. Roker repeated his request to Mr. Evans.

"Sorry," said Mr. Evans, gruffly and in haste, "I never carry any. I always use Hammond's." Mr. Roker thereupon produced a box from his own pocket, lit his pipe and sucked at it thoughtfully for some time. When it was properly alight, he said suddenly to Mr. Evans:

"I hear that your division is going to be reorganised."

"How did you hear that?" asked Mr. Evans, startled but ready for the defensive.

"Oh, I don't know," Mr. Roker replied vaguely. "I just heard it somewhere."

"You always do," Mr. Evans growled in a savage tone. "Well, you're probably right this time."

"I expect you'll find that there's a Higher Division man put in charge—just in time so that when the war's over he can say he did it all."

"Yes, you've said that before," Mr. Evans observed. "I remember your telling me that there was a Higher Division man coming to look after me and that you'd seen him and that he was a thruster. That was more than a year ago; and Harper was the man."

"Well, didn't he try?"

"He did," Mr. Evans admitted, "but he found that he had more than enough to do helping Burnet with financial questions."

"Yes, that's just it," Mr. Roker exclaimed, with scorn. "It was just by sheer luck that you got rid of him. You'd have let him take over if he'd been able. Now I'd have seen that he did take over and then I'd have given him hell. They did once give me a chief, you may remember. Well, where is he now? He's dead. *But*," he went on, speaking slowly and weightily, "if my information is correct, Harper has got something to do with this re-organisation."

"You *are* a man!" cried Mr. Evans, his chagrin lost in his admiration. "Now how the devil did you know that? Well, perhaps he may have something to do with it."

" I thought so," said Mr. Roker with satisfaction.

" But, I say, Evans," Cyril broke in, " is the division really going to be re-organised ? "

Rumours of impending change affected him with peculiar poignancy. It seemed to him now that always when his buds were about to open he was rudely transported. Some flowers profit by this treatment. Cyril, without consciously comparing himself to a flower, felt that one bedding out was enough for him.

" It may be," Mr. Evans answered shortly ; and then, in an endeavour to change the subject, he turned to Mr. Roker and asked appealingly, " Don't you ever have any troubles ? "

Mr. Roker replied in a pregnant phrase, " Women clerks," he said.

" Ah," cried Mr. Evans triumphantly, " I knew there must be someone who could get the better of you ! "

" They're beyond me sometimes," Mr. Roker confessed, " but you have to put up with them. I don't so much mind them being no use and not being able to spell and not knowing the difference between the Admiralty and the National Debt Office. But why, must they cry all over my papers when they're not pleased about something ? And that's not the worst, either," he added ominously.

" Ah," breathed Mr. Evans in joyful anticipation ; and Cyril added his eager request for details.

" No, not by any means the worst," said Mr. Roker darkly ; and then, after surveying their intrigued expressions for a moment, he went on in an ingenuous and cheerful manner, "But it's not the women clerks that are bothering me so much just now. It's the——"

"No, tell us about the women clerks," Cyril and Mr. Evans exclaimed with one voice. Mr. Roker pushed their curiosity on one side with a wave of his pipe.

"Not the women clerks, but the girl clerks," he pursued equably. "They don't work unless you're watching them all the time and they talk and eat sweets——" Cyril and Mr. Evans laughed together with great enjoyment; and Mr. Evans took it upon himself to explain:

"Roker thought he'd get a little credit for being economical," he said, "and so he got rid of a lot of his women clerks and had young girls in instead. The result is that he finds himself keeping a sort of kindergarten. He can't keep them in order and they play touch all over his room."

"That's right," said Mr. Roker, who had the Napoleonic courage to admit his own defeat.

"And one day," said Mr. Evans, "one of them got hold of a notice that said DON'T SPIT and pinned it on to his coat-tails."

"Well, that isn't right," Mr. Roker protested.

"It would have been much more to the point," Cyril observed, disregarding him, "if they'd simply put an 'URGENT' label on you. I sent you a paper last March that really needed an answer and this, if you don't mind my pointing it out, is the 17th of July."

"I don't mind a bit," said Mr. Roker. "I'll dig it out as soon as I get back and return it to you with a minute asking whether the situation hasn't changed in the interval."

"You chaps," said Mr. Evans, rising, "may not have any work to do, but I have. Come on."

They walked back to Transatlantic Chambers and separated.

As Cyril and Mr. Evans were going into their room Cyril asked:

"Is the division really going to be re-organised?"

"It is," Mr. Evans replied, snapping his lips together on the heels of the words.

"And what's going to become of me?" Cyril inquired anxiously, feeling how precarious was his position.

"I'm going to lose you," said Mr. Evans grimly.

"Oh, dear!" Cyril exclaimed.

"Well, if you ask me," said Mr. Evans, "a good many people would be glad to lose you. Still, I shall be sorry. But it's that chap Harper——"

"Oh, Harper!" cried Cyril.

"Yes," Mr. Evans went on. "He came in some time ago from the Divagation Commissioners and he thought"—here Mr. Evans's eyes flashed viciously—"he thought that he was going to take over my job. But he soon found that he couldn't do that and do Burnet's odd jobs at the same time. Now he wants assistance, and as it isn't a whole-time job for anyone you've to go and take some of your work with you, Treasury letters and so forth. I don't know quite what work he's got for you, but I can tell you one thing about it——"

"Yes?" said Cyril eagerly.

"You won't get any more pay for it," Mr. Evans concluded.

Cyril had not really supposed that he would; but the imminence of change afflicted him with alarm. "I shall be frightfully sorry to leave you," he said, in a voice melting with emotion. "I don't suppose I shall like working for Harper a bit."

"Get along with you," Mr. Evans rejoined. "You're going to enjoy yourself."

"I'm not," Cyril affirmed with conviction. "It's a silly business shifting one about like this just when one's settled down. I shall lose all interest in the office. I hope the war will be over soon." And he spent the remainder of the afternoon in deep gloom. It was something of a relief when he received a message asking him to go and see Mr. Harper at once.

Mr. Harper immediately alarmed Cyril by his faultlessness, though he was not in his room when Cyril arrived there. But his top-hat and his umbrella were; and Cyril waited some minutes wondering how on earth one rolled an umbrella as beautifully as that. When Mr. Harper did appear, his tie, his morning-coat and his spats—above all, his spats! not gaudy, but how correct!—completed the impression. And his words were perhaps less encouraging than he meant them to be.

"I want you," he said, "to help me in general matters and especially in looking after the staff. Staff questions are getting very difficult just now, very difficult indeed." Cyril nodded sagely but timidly.

"Yes," Mr. Harper continued, "the work extends and the reservoirs are drying up. Yes, drying up," he repeated, looking at his finger-nails in a somewhat dissatisfied manner. "When you want a new man for a job now, what you get is someone else's dud." And he surveyed Cyril with a kindly but thoughtful expression.

"Of course," Cyril murmured, his heart sinking. He wondered whether perhaps he ought not to offer his resignation forthwith.

"I want you to start to-morrow," Mr. Harper went on, with gentle melancholy. "I'll find you a room near to mine. And, of course, you'll have to use my clerks."

"Yes," said Cyril, trying to look as though he were unable to stir hand or foot without the assistance of three secretaries.

"Perhaps I'd better introduce you to the supervisor now." Mr. Harper pressed a bell-stud smartly. The door communicating with the next room opened and a girl clerk introduced herself half-way through, apparently endeavouring to conceal the twin facts that she was sucking a lump of toffee and that she had been interrupted in the enjoyment of a joke with a friend.

"I want Miss Mainwaring," said Mr. Harper; and the girl clerk disappeared. He turned to Cyril and said in an almost apologetic manner, "They want a lot of looking after, you know, and Miss Mainwaring is rather young for the job. I shall expect you to look after her."

"Of course," Cyril replied, with interior reservations. He had hardly spoken when Miss Mainwaring entered.

She was, as Mr. Harper had said, rather, or, as

Cyril thought, very, young. She was also extremely attractive. Her dark eyes set off to admiration the light chestnut of her hair, though it would be absurd to suggest that at the moment of which I write Cyril actually realised this important fact. He merely saw a dazzling creature come lightly and vigorously into the room and stand in front of Mr. Harper's desk, her skirts swinging round her as she came to rest. He strove to reassure himself with the thought that she was a clerk at thirty-five shillings a week and that she was to be amenable to his instructions; but his imagination refused the job.

"This is Mr. Hammond," said Mr. Harper. Cyril rose from his chair and bowed with what he supposed to be old-world courtesy.

Miss Mainwaring vouchsafed, extraordinarily baldly, a single "Yes" and surveyed him with a calm which might have concealed any emotion from respect to a profound amusement. She was in reality reflecting that, boy clerks aside, this was the first man under thirty she had met in the office. She also thought that he might have been a little better-looking.

"Mr. Hammond," proceeded Mr. Harper, "is coming to us to take charge of all our general questions."

"Yes," replied Miss Mainwaring, adhering to a safe line of eloquence.

"And his papers will pass through your room. Perhaps you'd like to talk to Miss Mainwaring about that to-morrow, Hammond?"

"Y-y-yes," Cyril stammered, his heart beating, between exhilaration and fear.

"Very well," said Mr. Harper. "Of course, you'll give instructions to Miss Mainwaring whenever you want anything done. You'd better send for her as soon as you come to-morrow." Cyril inwardly decided that he would never dare to do anything of the sort; but he ventured to think that, if the war lasted long enough, he might get to the point of saying good morning or good evening to her when they met in the corridor. And during the evening he overhauled his political opinions and found himself a jusqu'auboutiste of the most determined sort.

XVI

Mr. Harper, as Cyril speedily discovered, was a young man who meant to succeed; but he was, in certain aspects, a little more conservative than Mr. Pyeblew in the methods he used towards that desirable end. He did not intend to occupy the insecure though adaptable position of the freelance, who is lent constantly and indiscriminately by one Department to another. Floating geniuses have been known under such conditions to attain dizzy heights of power and salary. Mr. Harper certainly admired Mr. Pyeblew and envied him his emoluments, and still more his latest acting rank; but he regarded him as a rash visionary, straining into the empyrean on pinions which would be melted by the rays of returning peace. But Mr. Pyeblew, if he was prepared to wander, like Ishmael, without a place of rest, was determined, unlike that great antithesis of the bureaucratic temperament, to make a good thing out of it. He had recently crowned his previous triumphs and promotions by securing for himself the title of Controller of Tombstones; and yet, even in this there was concealed a measure of failure which had been revealed to Mr. Harper (by Mr. Burnet, who thought it would be good for him) and which was still unknown to Mr. Pyeblew.

"If they call me that," he had murmured, communing with himself as do great schemers in their hours of inspiration, "they can hardly get out of giving me an increase of salary." And when his new title was confirmed, he looked forward with confidence to this necessary sequel. But what had actually happened was something like this.

When he made his demand, and justified it with a somewhat rhetorical memorandum and two letters from monumental masons, one in Chester and the other in Banbury, expressing their confidence in him, Mr. Burnet, with reluctance, and Mr. Blood, with amusement, had supported the idea. Mr. Burnet had eventually blessed the proposal in a minute which, he thought, hinted rather neatly his own distaste for the pretensions of the title whilst allowing it to go forward for higher authority to see what an ass Mr. Pyeblew could make of himself. Mr. Blood had reflected with his usual sagacity that, while the proposal gave Mr. Pyeblew a label of considerable pomp, it left him still in unquestioned subordination to himself, William Blood, Director of Circumvention. Whoever else might score or suffer by the change, it was perfectly clear that Mr. Blood would score more conclusively than any; and he was content to allow Mr. Pyeblew to be made an Emperor on the same terms. There was therefore no hint of irony in the urbane minute with which he recommended Mr. Pyeblew's demand to the favourable notice of Sir James Bootle, who was, as the reader has forgotten, Permanent Under-Secretary in the Circumlocution Office.

Sir James at this time was beginning to feel the heavy stress of war. It had been suggested to him by a well-intentioned but somewhat brusque-mannered lady that it was hardly patriotic in him to continue to feed the pigeons on his window-sill with good and scarce bread-stuffs. In these days he felt for the first time that the situation was escaping from his control and that his routine could not continue indefinitely to adapt itself to a state of affairs that had been unmistakably modified during the two preceding years. There was even talk of a change of Ministry in which the Secretary of State for Circumlocutory affairs would very likely lose his job; and Sir James had certainly reckoned it as a compensating grace for many inconveniences, that the war had rid him of political changes, which he never got used to, however often they occurred.

Sir James, I say, was shaken, and when Mr. Pyeblew's humble request and petition reached him, backed by the crested and prevailing names of Mr. Blood and Mr. Burnet, he hesitated a little and finally decided that he would consult his old colleague, Mr. Runter. He had had brushes with Mr. Runter in the past, and indeed Mr. Runter's sphere of action was financial and not strictly concerned with the Secretariat. Yet the man, so Sir James reflected, in spite of the crabbedness which bureaucratic finance develops in her devotees, had been brought up in the ancient tradition of the Circumlocution Office. He had entered but a few years after Sir James himself; and he was a grandnephew of the great Lord Willersey (formerly Sir Tite Barnacle). He could fitly be regarded as a scion of a famous family, carrying on its fame under sadly changed conditions which had excluded all its other members from appointments to which they might justly have considered themselves entitled.

Sir James, therefore, went so far as to ask Mr.

Runter's advice on an unusual case; and Mr. Runter consented with alacrity to put his intelligence at Sir James's disposal. If it had not been for the war, he would, in fact, have been sitting in Sir James's place, for that gentleman had now just passed the age for retirement. The European conflict, however, demanded that we should retain most tenaciously in our Departments of State those whom accumulated wisdom best fitted for directing us in the struggle, namely, the oldest; and Mr. Runter continued to enjoy only £1500 a year and to covet Sir James's £2000. The matter was the more serious in that he himself was approaching the age of retirement. Should the end of the war find him beyond it, he and his senior would retire together; and a younger official would receive the prize. But, he thought, if it were to be bruited about that it was actually necessary for him to discharge his aged friend's functions, certain desirable events might perhaps be precipitated. He took the papers from Sir James's trembling hand and turned over the pages sharply.

"Ha!" he exclaimed, after a few moments' perusal. "We ought to keep an eye on this."

Now it must be observed that Mr. Pyeblew in framing his petition had been very careful not to hint or even allow to be discerned by any ordinary person his desire that his salary should be increased. That would come later. But the official who deals with financial questions learns in a very short time to smell such a desire many months before it is formulated in words; and Mr. Runter was satisfied that he knew very well what Mr. Pyeblew was after.

" Ha ! " he said again. " Wants more money, does he ? That's what he wants."

" Does he ? " observed Sir James, looking over the top of his glasses at Mr. Runter and admiring him. " Does he indeed ? "

" I haven't the least doubt about it," Mr. Runter affirmed with confidence, " but, of course, if you can safeguard yourself on that point, I don't see any reason . . . "

" It's very unusual," Sir James remarked fretfully, " very unusual, a title like that. It sounds almost like one of the new Ministries. Of course, there's been a Controller of Telephones for some time. And there was the Controller of the Navy. . . . But I don't like it, I don't like it ; it isn't the sort of thing we *do* in this office," he concluded, with querulous energy.

" I shouldn't trouble about that so much," said Mr. Runter. " What concerns me most is that this fellow evidently WANTS MORE MONEY."

" Do you think he does ? " asked Sir James, alarmed but not convinced on this point.

" I'm sure he does ; and I'm sure that, if I can help it, he's not going to get any."

" Then what are we to do ? " Sir James murmured distractedly. " Shall I refuse it at once ? Or shall I send it to you for your opinion so that you can advise against it ? It wouldn't take more than a day or so extra. My secretary would take it to your secretary at once. Or shall we refer it to the Treasury and get them to refuse it for us ? Only they take so long, even over refusing, and those people would be coming to see me . . ." His voice trailed away into unsatisfied silence.

"No, no, I shouldn't do that," replied Mr. Runter, cogitating profoundly. "I should say—I should say—yes, I have it! Tell them that the proposal is agreed and that you appreciate their good sense in putting forward a suggestion——"

"Suggestion . . ." muttered Sir James, who had already begun to write in blind faith.

"That will give Mr. Pyeblew the higher status his duties temporarily demand——"

"Demand . . ." muttered Sir James.

"Without having recourse to the unnecessary and wasteful expedient——"

"Wasteful expedient . . ."

"Of appointing him to an established rank carrying a salary higher than that which he at present receives."

"Receives . . . Admirable!" cried Sir James, replacing his quill pen in the glass jar of small shot which stood on his table. "I really think, Runter, that we've got out of a very difficult position with some credit to ourselves."

"I'm glad you think that, Bootle," Mr. Runter observed drily.

"And you might add that the excellent example thus set by Mr. Pyeblew will serve as a precedent in future cases." Sir James obeyed with a docility that was pretty to witness, and returned the paper forthwith to the Circumvention Branch. Mr. Blood and Mr. Burnet judged it wiser to keep from Mr. Pyeblew all but the direct and satisfactory answer to his request. And Mr. Pyeblew wondered whether, even with the high price of petrol, his new position might not prove to be equal to the expense of a modest two-seater.

But even before this instructive incident, Mr. Harper had been told that a man may lose the substance by snatching at the shadow; and he believed the prudential maxims he heard and endeavoured to put them into practice. In this case he translated the proverb into the formula that a man may lose a good salary by snatching at the empty bauble of a showy career. When the question of his transference to the Circumlocution Office was first raised, he made a minute inquiry into the situation of that Department; and, as a result of his researches, he asked and obtained that his appointment there should be made permanent and should not be merely a war measure. Indeed, if he had left it at that his decision would have been in many ways one of unimpeachable prudence; but he could not help seeing himself as a cool-headed, though daring, climber. Owing to the fact that his seniors in the Circumlocution Office were for the most part very much senior to him and due for retirement before long, he stood an excellent chance of becoming Permanent Under-Secretary soon after reaching the age of fifty.

But this very prospect after a little while so much inflamed him that he felt unable to rely (as he might more safely have done) on the mere effluxion of time; and he consequently put his trust in a wholly imaginary capacity for introducing into the bureaucratic career the hustling and ruthless methods practised in "big business." He was in reality a simple and engagingly harmless young man; and his colleagues were not much alarmed by his deep-laid plans for climbing over their heads. They did often fear, however, lest, in his innocent delusion, he should drag them down with him.

He was one of those men who cannot but be transparent to his subordinates, to whom in some inscrutable way his hopes and fears and private habits become intimately known. Miss Mainwaring communicated to Cyril much information under these heads in a preliminary interview in which, to his relief, she did most of the talking.

" Seems to be a queer chap," Cyril reported later to Mr. Evans. " You wouldn't think he'd be a crank, would you ? But it seems the one thing he's keen on outside the office is vegetarianism. Miss Mainwaring says he once lectured her for half an hour on how beastly it was to eat the burnt bodies of dead animals."

" Good Lord ! " said Mr. Evans. " He must be off his rocker."

" Miss Mainwaring says," Cyril continued, " that he's afraid of Burnet."

" Nothing queer in that," Mr. Evans commented. " So am I—horribly afraid of him. And so would you be if you'd ever been near him."

" Miss Mainwaring says," Cyril went on, " that there's really nothing to be afraid of, if you stand up to him."

" Oh, isn't there ? " cried Mr. Evans, indignant. Mr. Burnet's awesomeness was one of the principal items in his religion. " I wonder if she's ever tried it ? And, anyway, who the dooce *is* Miss Mainwaring ? "

" Oh, she's the supervising clerk," Cyril said hastily. " She's been explaining things to me." And he added in a rallentando, hoping by an anticipatory stroke to prevent unnecessary suspicions from growing in Mr. Evans's heart, " She's quite a kid—rather refreshing after all the old ladies one meets here. But I daresay she wouldn't be anything to look at outside."

" Oh, that's it, is it, you young dog, you ? " Mr. Evans rejoined, digging Cyril powerfully in the ribs.

" Don't be such an ass, Evans," Cyril protested. " Have you ever seen a woman clerk in this office that anyone could—could lose his balance over ? "

" Let me give you a bit of advice, young man," said Mr. Evans, disregarding him. " Whether she's pretty or not, you'd better keep a heavy hand on her. No good ever comes of letting them get above themselves. And, of course, if you *do* feel inclined to get sloppy about her, she won't like you any better for being easy with her. *I* know them. If you want to make any running, begin by being strict."

" Don't be such an ass, Evans," Cyril said again ; and turned the conversation, adroitly, he thought, into another channel.

When he went back into his room, he found among his papers one which dealt with a girl clerk who had overstayed her holiday leave by two days. Zealous for the efficiency of the service, he prepared himself to write a minute in severe terms. But on looking through the paper he found an earlier minute which had rather compromised the position and which was signed, in a free and flourishing hand, " J. Mainwaring." Here, he surprised himself by thinking, was an apt opportunity. His hand went out for the bell and then hesitated while his heart momentarily fluttered. He rebuked himself and pressed the button fiercely. The messenger girl that resulted was ordered to send Miss Mainwaring in at once; and she departed, grumbling to herself that the young gentleman had no cause to look so cross at *her*.

Miss Mainwaring appeared a moment later and swung round the door with the light movement that charmed Cyril. It reminded him of the entrance of an assured favourite upon the musical comedy stage. He looked up at her, frowned, and forgot what he had intended to say. All that filled his mind was a strong desire to ask her what "J." stood for.

"Yes, Mr. Hammond," she said, sweetly and interrogatively, by way of filling up the awkward hiatus.

"I—er—oh—er—yes, this paper . . ." mumbled Cyril, opening it and pointing at the offending minute. She came to his side to look at it; and the enigmatic "J" danced before his eyes.

"Yes, I wrote that," she admitted cheerfully.

"Well—er—don't you see—what I mean, is——" Cyril paused and looked up at her in mute supplication. She surveyed him for a moment with that expression of candid innocence which is often attributed to babes at the breast but never achieved by anybody till a much riper age.

"Oh, yes," she said at length. "It's all right, Mr. Hammond. I showed it to Bill before I sent it and he said it was all right."

"Bill?" said Cyril. "Who's Bill?"

"Oh, Bill is Mr. Harper," she replied, unruffled. "We all call him Bill. I expect he knows. I believe he likes it." She put her hands behind her on the desk, as though to seat herself casually on it; but Cyril, growing more and more dazzled, made a nervous movement which she misjudged or affected to misinterpret.

"Of course, another time," she said, standing up again more primly, "I shall come and ask you. But perhaps you'd prefer to sign all the minutes yourself? This minute *is* all right, isn't it?"

Cyril threw to the winds his intention of first reprimanding her and then forbidding her ever to put her signature on a paper again. "Oh, yes—yes—" he stammered. "I mean, no—no— Of course . . . every confidence . . . sure you'll be all right."

"Thank you, Mr. Hammond," she said composedly and left the room as lightly as she had come.

Daphne Phyllis, a youthful and privileged girl clerk in her room, greeted her return with interest.

"What did Silly Cyril want?" she asked. "Like his cheek sending for you!"

"It's no business of yours, Daphne," Miss Mainwaring replied severely. "And you must remember that we are under Mr. Hammond's orders now. And, anyway," she went on in a more genial tone, "I don't believe that Silly's such an ass as Old Bill."

This goes to show that, whatever Mr. Pyeblew, Mr. Harper and, at an infinite distance, Cyril, might think of their own careers, and however they might calculate their chances as between themselves, there existed, side by side with them, in the same building, another race which rated them by quite different standards. But this fact was mercifully concealed from Mr. Harper and from Mr. Pyeblew. It might have pleased Cyril.

Cyril, however, remained in unblissful ignorance, and fell for a time into a misogynistic fit of reaction against Miss Mainwaring and her colleagues. In this mood he wrote a sadly cynical poem, which I will present to the reader *in extenso* in the next chapter.

XVII

ADVICE TO A TEMPORARY WOMAN CLERK

O temporary woman clerk,
Come hither to my side and hark
To all the varied things that you
Must do, and those you mustn't do.

This be my first admonishment:
Eschew the immoderate use of scent,
Do not take your morning tub
In patchouli or Jockey Club;
And if you must use powder—well,
Use a kind I cannot smell.
If this commandment you'll observe
In grace to my olfactory nerve,
I'll stand as much as I can stand
Of flashing rings on either hand,
And paint and powder inches thick,
But scent, believe me, turns me sick.
These matters will be, after all,
The most important that will
Within the bounds of your career
And ornamental sojourn here;
No one expects a woman clerk
(The rhyme will suit your ear) to work;
She of the sort I love the best
Need only pass a single test;

I will not praise her industry
Or diligence, or say that she
Is good or kind or wise or fair,
But that I knew not she was there.

But since we suffer—more's the pity !—
From many a wandering Committee
Whose idle curiosity
About you *often troubles* me,
I might as well, in brief, detail
The things in which you mustn't fail :
When a Committee heaves in sight,
Drop all in which you take delight—
Drop the comb and curling-tongs,
Drop the sticky sweet bon-bons,
Suppress your endless thirst for tea,
Let the mirror hidden be ;
Bend above your eye-wash task,
And answer gently when they ask.
If you'll do this, then there will be
A rise for you and praise for me.

If by some mischance you do
Find real work in front of you,
Get rid of it as quick's you can—
Preferably to a man.
The most of you that I'll demand
Is to take papers round by hand ;
Some older ladies take up four
Hours from the fifth to the second floor,
But, being young, I think that you
Should get it done in less than two.

But do not worry. If you err,
I am, not you, the sufferer.
This office is not what it was,
Being governed now by milder laws ;
We live, alas, in kindness lapped ;
I mustn't swear, you can't be slapped.
Of old, the folk who used to strew
My papers round were sawn in two ;
But now I hardly think they could
Do that to you. I wish they would.

XVIII

If the reader will allow me—and I insert this reservation merely to prove my good manners, for the reader has no means of preventing me—I will direct the course of the story for a moment to an impressive and important figure which it has somewhat neglected. I mean the man Smith, His Majesty's Secretary of State for Circumlocutory Affairs.

Smith—but need I dilate? Surely you know all there is to be known of him? He was born, as you must remember, in the year 1860 and luckily escaped thereby the charge of being a plagiarism on the works of Mr. Hilaire Belloc. After contesting gallantly the hopeless division of West Pedlington, he married the youthful aunt of an ex-Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster; and it was immediately recognised by the organisers of his party that his abilities deserved a place in the House of Commons. Thereafter he held a safe seat—or so, at least, he thought, until the fateful month of December, 1918—and rose steadily in the opinion of those who were of a like way of thinking upon the destinies of our far-flung empire. Two or three years before the war, widespread popular enthusiasm supported his elevation to the Cabinet to take charge of the Circumlocution Office, which then chanced to be vacant. His courage and honesty were mentioned in innumerable articles in the daily press. One paragraphist even extolled his brilliant intellectual gifts. But the editor remarked that you did no good by being gratuitously absurd; and this point was not again insisted on.

In short, he was one of the ornaments of our political system; and I give you my word that I will not force him upon your notice more than is absolutely necessary.

Some intellectual gifts he must have had, for he clung to his office successfully in the re-organisation of 1915. But as the eventful following year wore to its close, he raised his nostrils in the air, sniffed at the future and began to experience doubts. He therefore surprised a somnolent House of Commons by observing, apparently apropos of nothing, that, while he was confident his Department would emerge with credit from any scrutiny by no matter what experts, he yet could not help feeling that the powerful minds of the business community might be able to make suggestions which would be of value to the machinery of Government. In his Department, he said, they were considering how best to secure the co-operation of fresh intellects. When he sat down, a wild man rose in the back benches and passionately drew attention to the shortage in some parts of the county of Flint of stone for monumental masonry. The House was thereupon counted out.

In the Circumlocution Office next day, Sir James Bootle rubbed his hands together and spoke with weighty approval to Mr. Runter.

"Let them inquire," he said, "let them inquire. Let them see what our work is and they will own that they couldn't do it themselves. I tell you, Runter, the things that go on in private business are inconceivable.

The public would be appalled if it only knew. Why, do you know, my sister's husband's nephew is a director of a munitions firm and he admitted to me the other day that he sometimes lets his secretary sign his letters for him. I'm sure, Runter, quite sure, that we have nothing to fear from any inquiry into our efficiency."

Mr. Runter turned round to warm his hands at the fire and did not speak for some moments. When at last he did, he said slowly, "I hope so, Bootle—and yet you know there are some odd things going on in Circumvention. . . . There's that man Pyeblew . . . I own I feel a little uneasy. But Smith was quite vague. He didn't actually promise a Committee. It may come to nothing after all."

When the Director of Establishment met the Director of Delays and Evasions at lunch in their club, he exhibited an altogether unwonted vivacity. He smiled over the soup, he chuckled over the fish, in so irrelevant a manner, that his companion was impelled to ask him, over the joint, what it was that pleased him so much.

"Why, my dear Tupper," said the Director of Establishment happily, "I'm afraid you'll think me malicious, but I can't help wondering how Runter will like an inquiry into the finance of the Department. We all know he's an earnest hard-working man but unfortunately there's no doubt he should never have had that post. Gross waste and mismanagement, I fear . . . Oh, well, he's had a long run, but I'm afraid it will spoil his chance of having the retirement age raised so that he can succeed Bootle."

"I fear you are right," said Mr. Tupper gravely. "I don't see how Runter can come out of it with any credit. Luckily *we* have no reason to object to an inquiry, Hoskins, have we?"

"None, Tupper, I trust," answered Mr. Hoskins; and the two dignitaries finished their lunch and returned to their labours. Each was observed that afternoon by his subordinates to be a little more zealous than usual in demanding explanation of what had been done in his name.

In Transatlantic Chambers, Mr. Blood, who had dropped into Mr. Burnet's room to discuss an urgent matter of business, stayed a moment after its completion, contrary to his usual practice, for conversation of a more general sort. He casually asked Mr. Burnet what he thought of the ominous hint let fall by the Secretary of State.

"One thing at least," said Mr. Burnet grimly, staring at the ground between his feet, "this means the end of Tupper, I suppose. Delays and Evasions is in such a state that the merest child could see it was all wrong—even a business man won't be hoodwinked. They'll have to get rid of him, of course, when the Committee reports."

"Surely that's very drastic," Mr. Blood murmured suavely. "But they might find him promotion elsewhere."

"Oh, well, naturally, that's what I mean," said the Assistant Director hastily.

"And you think," Mr. Blood pursued, "that we have no reason to be—er—to be uneasy?"

"None," growled Mr. Burnet, "so far as my side of the work is concerned."

Mr. Blood received the dubious assurance without changing his expression. " Yes, yes," he murmured. " . . . Of course there's been no actual mention of a Committee *yet.*"

" Sure to be one," said Mr. Burnet.

" Yes, yes," said Mr. Blood again, slowly. " Perhaps if they looked into Hoskins's branch first . . . The Establishment work is in a disgraceful state of confusion." But Mr. Burnet's desires were focussed on the discomfiture of the Director of Delays and Evasions and he made no response to this suggestion.

" Well," said Mr. Blood, rising, " perhaps a Committee may not be appointed after all. We should be saved a great deal of—of unnecessary work, if it were not." But as he went back to his own room, his urbane and tranquil features assumed the expression of one who does not mean to hide a real danger behind easy hopes.

Mr. Pyeblew, in the solitude which he preferred, remarked sullenly to himself that there was now perhaps some chance of getting rid of that old bluebottle, Burnet.

Mr. Evans remarked to Cyril at lunch that it didn't make much difference to the Second Division, anyway, but that he hated being messed about.

Mr. Harper remarked cheerfully to Cyril after lunch, " I expect this Committee will give us a lot of extra work."

Cyril wondered privately how much of this work Mr. Harper would do himself and went home feeling depressed. Miss Mainwaring, overtaking him in the entrance-hall, rallied him on his air of dejection and adjured him, in accordance with the best opinion on the subject, to leave official cares behind him in the office and to enjoy himself while he was free. She added that she was going to a dance that evening and expected to have a good time, as her programme had been filled up by telephone during the day. When she left him with a buoyant step and a friendly wave of the hand, he plodded slowly in the direction of his Tube, feeling more depressed than ever.

XIX

AFTER thus sowing pleasure and pain with a careless hand among his staff, Smith, honest man, found himself reluctantly obliged to burden his three ornamental secretaries, Algernon, Percy and Hereward, whose existence the reader has by this time justifiably forgotten, with more work than they had yet known. His other secretaries had accepted with alacrity the job of forming the Committee and starting it on its career; but the Second Division man who acted as their clerk had informed them peremptorily that he could not do it and had packed them back to their chief to represent in a heart-breaking manner their fears of a nervous breakdown. Smith was for a moment gravelled; but at last he thought of the three brothers.

"Surely," he said to himself, "they are capable of arranging meetings on the telephone and sending out wires, if I tell them what to say." And Algernon, Percy and Hereward, when he sent for them, proved to be of the same opinion.

"Of course," said Percy.

"We quite understand," said Hereward. Algernon, who was the eldest and thought that sufficient, said nothing but nodded his consent.

Smith therefore, in consultation with Mullins, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary, drew up a list of business men who were to be invited to lend to the Circumlocution Office the freshness of their minds. Mullins, as was allowed by everyone who knew him, was a charming young man ; and he was united to the members of the Cabinet by so many ties of blood and marriage that even *The New Witness* had never unravelled them all. Smith liked him, liked his cheerful young presence in the office and admired the careless hearty way in which he dealt alike with important but taciturn officials and with voluble but no less important business magnates. He did sometimes find Mullins's preoccupation with the Volunteer Regiment which he had raised in his constituency, and whose uniform he frequently wore, a little annoying. He found it so on this occasion.

" Come, Arthur," he said with some severity, " do you know anything about the Mayor of Bursley ? Do listen to what I'm saying."

" Yes, Uncle," said Mullins, who was arranging inkpots to represent a battalion in column of platoons. " I'm sorry. What were you saying ? "

" I asked you if you knew anything about the Mayor of Bursley ? "

" Do I ? No—yes—let me see." Mullins cogitated, playing with the buckles on his Sam Browne, and at length said slowly, " I think we met him and his lot once on a field-day, but he wasn't any good, you know."

" How do you mean, no good ? " Smith asked patiently.

" No—no personality," Mullins began, " no force of character, no *dash*——"

" We'll put him down for a start," said Smith with alacrity.

And so at last the list was compiled. It included, besides the Mayor, two stockbrokers, the General

Manager of an obscure railway, one banker and a hay-broker in a large way of business. Mullins regarded it with faint dislike.

"Looks to me damned like an extract from an Honours List," he said. "There's one good thing anyway—we haven't got to give any reasons."

"We always *can* find them easily when we have to," Smith remarked with philosophy. So saying, he dismissed Mullins and sent for Algernon, Percy or Hereward, indifferent which of them should answer the summons. They were all unoccupied at the moment and lounged in together, prepared for a pleasant chat with their chief. He explained to them as lucidly as he could what was the programme that now faced them.

There was at first some little difficulty in deciding which of them was to act as secretary to the Committee. Smith had designated Algernon for the post, partly because he was the eldest and partly because his name began with A. But when it appeared that the secretary would have to spend long hours closeted with the Committee at meetings to which his brothers could not accompany him, there was a considerable uproar, to which Smith hastily deferred. He had managed to elude their mother for several months and did not wish to remind her too plainly of his existence. It was therefore settled that Algernon should be secretary and Percy and Hereward assistant secretaries.

"And then," said Smith hopefully, "there'll always be at least one of you to take notes of the proceedings if the others should—er—should happen to—er—well, to fall asleep, for example."

" Oh, we shan't go to sleep," said Percy, round-eyed in remonstrance.

" No, no, we shall keep awake somehow," said Hereward. Algernon said nothing but corroborated the assurances of his brothers with a movement of his head.

" Very well, then," Smith went on, " here's a list of the members I propose to invite. I want you "—he spoke very slowly, tapping off each point with the index finger of one hand on the palm of the other— " I want you to send an invitation to each of them by wire. Here's the wire, I've written it out for you. Now will you be sure that it goes off at once ? "

" Yes," Percy answered, holding out his hand for the paper ; and Hereward looked over his shoulder to examine it.

" But, Mr. Smith," he said brightly, " you've given us six names and only one wire." Algernon said nothing but turned on Smith a look of mute inquiry.

" Quite, quite," Smith replied in a patient tone, " but I want you to send the same wire to each of them. Do you see ? You'll make to have six copies of all the papers for the Committee."

" Oh, I see, Mr. Smith," Percy assured him, with an intelligent expression. " We'll see to it."

" Are you sure you understand ? " Smith asked anxiously of Algernon. Algernon nodded in solemn silence ; and the three brothers went back to their own room.

" Now let's get this straight," said Hereward, seating himself on a table. " Don't you look so worried, Algernon. We'll see you through. You'd come an awful mucker if we didn't, but we'll look after you. Now see here—the wire's addressed to Towle, Mayor's Parlour, Bursley, and there's a list of names after it. Now we've got to copy out that wire and send it to each of them."

"I say," said Percy, "oughtn't we to make it a little different for each of them? You know when we used to write letters to people thanking them for Christmas presents, Mother never would let us send the same letter to all of them."

"This isn't the same thing," Hereward decided. "These people aren't relations. I don't suppose there's any chance of them getting together and comparing the wires."

"All right," Percy agreed. "Only oughtn't we to get a clerk or a typist or something to do it?"

"No, no, Percy," said Hereward in a pained tone. "Don't you understand that the old man's given us an important job and that we ought to see it through ourselves? We can't leave it to a clerk."

"All right," said Percy, shrugging his shoulders. "Only it'll take the deuce of a time, won't it? Don't forget we've got seats for *All Legs* to-night."

"It'll be quite easy," Hereward explained soothingly. "I'll read the telegram out and you and Algernon can write it down. Then you'll only have to write three each." Algernon and Percy accordingly seated themselves at their tables, bent each over a pad of telegraph-forms and laboriously traced the words which Hereward read to them three times in a loud, distinct voice. Then they went to the telegraph-room, where Percy and Hereward, in strophe and antistrophe, impressed upon the operator the importance of the communication he was to dispatch.

On the afternoon of the following day, Smith sent for Algernon and, when his door opened, was surprised, if relieved, to see that taciturn youth enter alone. He asked if any of the recipients of yesterday's wire had yet replied.

" All of them," said Algernon.

" And have they all accepted ? "

" Yes," said Algernon.

" Good," said Smith. " Now the next thing is to send off this wire." And, seizing a piece of paper, he scribbled a few words on it and held it out to Algernon, who took it and departed without wasting any more time in frivolous conversation.

Algernon's brothers had been absent interviewing the woman clerk who had forgotten to send in any sugar with their tea that afternoon. They met him in the corridor, and showed him the extra supply of biscuits which they had extracted from her as compensation. He exhibited the wire in return and Hereward immediately took charge of it.

" Now we're moving," he cried enthusiastically. " We'll get on with this at once. And I hope you see how useful organisation is. First thing you have to do in a job of this kind is to set up a routine and then all the rest is quite easy. Now this wire's addressed to Towle, Mayor's Parlour, Bursley, like the one yesterday. We'll carry on as we did then."

Again, therefore, Algernon and Percy seated themselves at their tables, bent each over a pad of telegraph-forms and laboriously traced the words which Hereward read to them three times in a loud, distinct voice. It is doubtful whether the gratification of Mr. Towle, Mayor of Bursley, on receiving an invitation to act as Chairman of the Committee was exceeded by that felt by Mr. Minns, General Manager of the Flint and Merionethshire Railway, on receiving the same request. It is certain that Mr. Cuxper and Mr. Whale, stockbrokers, resident respectively in South Norwood and West Hampstead, were decorously but powerfully exhilarated by an identical recognition of their abilities. Mr. Badger, a hay-broker in a large way of business, a coarse and naive man, said to his wife, "I say, old girl, this looks like something. How'd you like to be Her Ladyship, eh?" Mr. Polperro (late Pfingst), who was known to his associates, and the police, as a banker, said to the niece who kept house for him, "Tut, tut, how they take advantage of a public-spirited man," and opened a small bottle of champagne.

It can hardly be denied, in face of these facts, that Algernon, Percy and Hereward had created six times as much pleasure in honest hearts as would have been dispensed by Smith's niggardly hand. Since to the true philosopher all pleasures are illusions, why should we distinguish between illusions? There can be no doubt that pleasure was bestowed, in a manner consonant with their careless and generous natures. It fitted well with the order of things that the adjustments, which cold necessity required in their benevolent arrangements, should be accomplished by means of letters personally dictated and signed by their narrower and more frugal chief.

XX

It was in November, 1916, that Cyril, looking from his window upon grey and forbidding weather, was inspired to paint a little water-colour showing the roofs of Westminster washed by continual rain, which he entitled "The Outlook of a Civil Servant" and sold for five guineas. Mr. Evans, though he maintained that this sum had been secretly paid by one of Cyril's aunts or by some other person who had an inscrutable desire to benefit him—perhaps with a view to doing him out of something later on—was in reality immensely impressed by it. He was also delighted by the fact that he got a dinner and a seat at a music-hall out of the proceeds.

During the performance, flattered by strong drink, bright colours, cheerful music and a bewitching chorus, he betrayed his delight in an unmistakable manner. In front of them, the first act of the review banged and shouted its way to a finale which was almost unbearable to civilians but which was intended faintly to tickle the ears of soldiers accustomed to even louder noises. Around them, these soldiers enjoyed themselves unreservedly in the blandishments of their younger, and the adoration of their elder, women-folk. 2nd Lieut. P. Smith found it possible to conduct an intimate flirtation with his cousin, Miss Topsy Jones of the Admiralty, in a voice which his platoon would have thought excessive on parade. Mrs. Smith was able, without exciting the resentment of her son, to yell to her brother and neighbour, Mr. Jones, that only the jealousy of his colonel stood between Phillip and the Military Cross. Mr. Jones roared in reply that his son had been recommended twice for the D.S.O. and had failed to receive it only on account of a gross clerical error. " I shall write to our local member," he added ; and he was lucky enough to escape protests from the deserving young man who, hands held trumpet-fashion to his mouth, was inquiring of Miss Phillida Smith, of the War Office, whether it might not be possible for them to get separated from the rest of the party on the way home to Crouch End.

Under cover of this texture of sound, Mr. Evans was moved to inform Cyril, in the accents which he usually reserved for the telephone and which here were in complete harmony with the circumstances, that a young man who avoided the company of the other sex was making a mistake which he would infallibly regret in later life.

" Why," he exclaimed, regarding Cyril with a look of brutal appraisement, " I don't suppose you've ever flirted with a girl in your life, have you ? "

Cyril realised that the comments thus vociferated by Mr. Evans with so much effort in his ear were hardly likely to reach any other, but he nevertheless looked about him apprehensively.

" I don't know so much about that," he answered, stiffening a little.

" I do," said Mr. Evans, with his usual directness. " Now be a little man and tell me honestly—have you ever so much as held a girl's hand ? "

Cyril laughed in what he hoped was a bored, or at the least, a non-committal, manner and fixed his attention on the stage.

"Where you'll get the thick end of the stick," pursued Mr. Evans reflectively, zealous for the welfare of his benighted young friend, "is when you fall in love with some girl and find you've not had any practice in telling her so. One of these days, you know, you'll have to go over the top and then you'll make a muck of it. You ought to look ahead and get a little practice somehow." He continued in an identical strain to the end of the performance, indifferent to the fact that he met with no response from his pupil.

But Cyril, though he assured himself on the way home that he had been shocked by the cynicism of Mr. Evans's advice, was not unaffected by it. The accusations which his friend had levelled against him were, he was bound to admit, justified in the fact. Was the deduction which his friend drew from them equally valid ? As he undressed, yawning, he made a conscious effort to exclude Miss Mainwaring's name from his train of thought. But the conscious effort was fatal. He surrendered. Suppose, just for the sake of having a concrete example, he wished to tell Miss Mainwaring . . . He turned over restlessly in bed and readjusted his pillows. She would be more useful as a concrete example if only he knew what that "J" stood for. It couldn't be Jane ? Perhaps it was Jean or Josephine. Evans, in his young days, would have asked her without any embarrassment. Well, then, supposing he had actually the intention of making love to Miss Mainwaring . . . in the act of turning over again, he fell asleep.

He woke in the morning with an odd feeling that he made some kind of momentous decision overnight. As he shaved, he suddenly remembered what it was. Only, of course, it had not been a decision at all . . . Or was it ? He went to the office with a curiously fluttering heart.

He had been in his room only a few moments when Miss Mainwaring brought him a paper to be signed. He frowned at her in an absent way, discovered that the paper was not in order and gruffly directed her to set it right.

She showed, however, no intention of immediately obeying him. Instead, she remarked in a cheerful manner :

" I saw you at the Melodeum last night, Mr. Hammond."

" Did you ? " he asked, in a choked voice, hoping deeply that she had not been near enough to overhear Mr. Evans's probings into the truth.

" Yes," she continued, " you were with Mr. Evans. We could see you laughing together. We took my brother, who's home on leave, and one of his friends. I think one ought to be nice to these boys when they're home on leave, don't you ? "

" Of course," said Cyril angrily. He had not seen this particular group but he had watched others which were, he supposed, similar in composition and behaviour.

" It's so rotten for him," she went on. " He's engaged to a girl in France, a V.A.D., and they never get leave at the same time."

" Who ? Your brother ? " asked Cyril, with an affectation of indifference. He had observed a gleam of hope but was determined not to betray himself.

"No, his friend," Miss Mainwaring answered innocently. "So we have to take him about when he's in town. But, of course, he's rather a silly babe." This relief from foreboding had a surprising effect on Cyril and it is impossible to guess what might have happened next, had not a strange woman-clerk entered the room just as he turned to Miss Mainwaring with mouth half opened to say he knew not what. The newcomer was of advanced years and discouraging appearance. She looked first at Cyril and then at Miss Mainwaring with an expression of deepening disapproval and advanced remorselessly towards them. Miss Mainwaring pursed up her lips, darted a humorous sideways glance at Cyril and went out.

The intruder fixed a steely glance on the discomfited young man and said abruptly, "Mr. Pyeblew's compliments and can you lend him a copy of yesterday's Hammond ?"

"I beg your pardon ?" asked Cyril helplessly, too much astonished to remember his annoyance.

"I said—Mr. Pyeblew's compliments and can you lend him a copy of yesterday's Hammond," the lady repeated tartly.

"I'm sure Mr. Pyeblew didn't say that," Cyril murmured.

"I've told you what Mr. Pyeblew said," the lady rapped. "He wants it at once."

"But he can't have said that. I don't know what you mean. Are you sure someone hasn't been—er—pulling your leg ?"

The lady drew herself up in a dignified manner. "I've told you what Mr. Pyeblew said," she rapped again. "He wants yesterday's Hammond at once and he said you would give it to me. You *are* Mr. Hansard, aren't you?" Cyril felt a little dazed but an intellectual effort solved the problem. He silently handed the lady the Parliamentary Debates of the day before.

When she had gone without thanking him, he fell again into meditation and found, as many men have found before him, that solitary thinking is a dangerous thing. Twenty-four hours ago, he had not formulated to himself the desire to make definite advances of any kind to Miss Mainwaring. Now, relieved of the fear that the way for such advances was already barred, he found himself convinced not only that he had decided on them but also that their success was reasonably assured. He spent the greater part of the morning bending with absorbed countenance over a minute which he had received from the Director of Establishment. This laid it down that "girl clerks under sixteen years of age are not entitled to leave upon the return of their fiancés from the front." An uninstructed observer might have supposed that Cyril was preparing to dispute this ruling. But, intimately as it affected the interests of his young friend, Daphne Phyllis (who, if it had been reversed, might have claimed to spend the whole of her official career on leave), Cyril was not really absorbed by it. He was revolving in his mind three questions: (i) whether, and if so, how, he should ask Miss Mainwaring out to lunch; (ii) where he should take her; (iii) how he should escape with her unobserved from Transatlantic Chambers.

As one o'clock approached, the ferment in his mind boiled higher and higher. It would be a good thing, he decided, to overtake her casually and without premeditation in the corridor as they both went out and to issue his invitation as if on the spur of the moment. He therefore set his door ajar so that he might watch the door of Miss Mainwaring's room and, at the proper moment, without too much show of haste, walk after her. Between twelve-thirty and one he prowled restlessly up and down, peering nervously round the door at frequent intervals. At five minutes past the hour he heard Miss Mainwaring's door open and gay voices issuing from it, her own recognisable among them. Daphne Phyllis made a joke of which he caught only the sound and not the sense; and Miss Mainwaring laughed deliciously in acknowledgment. Cyril writhed with anticipation and dread.

Then he heard a remark in Miss Mainwaring's voice which plainly indicated by its tone that she was bidding farewell; and he seized his hat, stick and gloves from the table, knocking over an ink-well and scattering all his papers on the floor. At this moment his telephone rang; and simultaneously he heard Miss Mainwaring in the corridor. He wavered. And then his slavery to the tyrannous instrument settled down on him and involuntarily he placed the receiver to his ear.

"I hope you don't mind my ringing you up, Mr. Hammond," said a thin female voice, "but my sister thought she would like to get work in this office and I thought——"

"Yes, yes, yes," cried Cyril frantically. "I'll find her a job—yes, a good job. Tell her to come and see me." He replaced the receiver violently and ran down the corridor to the lift in time to see Miss Mainwaring's smiling face on a level with his knees and rapidly disappearing.

He lunched alone and braced his discouraged spirit with two successive pints of light lager. He returned to the office swinging his stick gaily and humming a tune under his breath. On his table he found a note asking him to call immediately on Mr. Harper; and Daphne Phyllis, who met him on his way thither, informed him that "Bill had been shouting for him for nearly an hour and was frothing at the mouth." Cyril, nevertheless, entered unmoved the presence of his chief, threw himself down upon a chair in a negligent attitude and did not even pretend to be impressed when Mr. Harper complained that a recent return had been inaccurate in several weighty particulars.

"It's all very well," said Mr. Harper, more in sorrow than in anger, "but I get into trouble, not you, when this kind of thing happens."

"I'm very sorry," Cyril replied brusquely and with ostentatious insincerity. "I did the best I could." Mr. Harper loved peace. That painful scene with Mr. Burnet was over. Why begin another with Cyril? He tried to make it clear that he spoke rather as a colleague and a friend than as a chief. Cyril shrugged his shoulders irritably and repeated his previous remark; and Mr. Harper apologised for troubling him.

Cyril, remarking that he had a busy afternoon in front of him and no time to spare, withdrew without further conversation. On returning to his own room, he sat down, sank his face in a pile of papers on the desk and resumed his confused meditations.

Presently Miss Mainwaring appeared with his tea. Cyril started up, replaced his glasses, straightened his tie and was seized with a wholly new idea.

"Do you know," he said, with an uneasy attempt at ease of manner, "I do so hate—er—drinking by myself. Couldn't you—er—couldn't you——" Miss Mainwaring regarded him with the clear uncomprehending eye of a child of five; and he stumbled uncomfortably to the end of his sentence. "Wouldn't you bring your tea in here and have it with me? There are one or two papers I want to go through with you and——" The request faded away under Miss Mainwaring's gaze like a wisp of smoke in sunlight. It seemed an age to Cyril while she perceptibly hesitated over her reply. At last she said:

"Oh, my tea's waiting for me in our room. You'd better bring yours in there."

"Oh, yes, yes—of course—I should like to," Cyril replied confusedly and at random. And like an automaton, moved by her touch on the spring, he rose, seized his cup and followed her down the corridor, eyeing dubiously the liquid which slopped at every step generously into the saucer. When he entered the clerks' room, holding the cup before him, there was an instant and blood-chilling hush. Daphne Phyllis hastily thrust her novel into a drawer and, springing up, began feverishly to turn over the entries in a card-index. Miss Rosalind Paley giggled and dipped her pen in Daphne Phyllis's tea. Miss Willink, a lady of uncertain age but of ascertained acidity, looked up and said in a clear voice :

" Good afternoon, Mr. Hammond."

" Good afternoon," Cyril stammered. Miss Mainwaring alone of all the persons present retained complete control of herself and asked Cyril whether he had enough sugar in his tea.

" Oh, quite," said Cyril, putting the cup down with a jar that splashed the letters prepared for Mr. Harper to sign. Daphne Phyllis made an odd, spluttering noise and Miss Paley, tenderly solicitous, cried :

" Oh, Daphne, what's the matter ? "

" Nothing," mumbled Daphne Phyllis indistinctly. " I only bit my tongue."

Cyril's confidence at this point suddenly evaporated. He was wondering whether he should dash incontinently from the room or sink on the nearest chair and pretend that he had fainted, when the inner door opened and Mr. Harper's head appeared round it, like a plesiosaurus from the pencil of Mr. E. T. Reed. Cyril could not remember ever before having been grateful for the sight of Mr. Harper.

" Oh, there you are, Hammond," said that able young official. " I was just going to send for you. Come in for a minute, will you ? If you've quite finished tea, of course," he added as an afterthought.

" Quite—quite," cried Cyril, from the depths of his soul, following the retreating head through the door. Mr. Harper, too, was having tea and was eating a strange compost of nuts and fruits which he disengaged from a paper packet as he ate. The sultana cake on which the ruck of his staff battened was not vegetarian enough for him.

"I want you," he said, pausing in the consumption of this dainty and brushing some crumbs from his exquisite trousers, "to begin writing some notes for a memorandum for the Committee."

"The Committee ?" Cyril inquired vaguely. "Oh, yes, the Committee !"

"I think," Mr. Harper continued, observing his subordinate with an oblique and uncertain gaze, "that it would be rather a score for us if we had something ready for them when they reach this branch. You know, they're giving Delays and Evasions a terrible time."

"Are they ?" said Cyril, growing more sober.

"Yes, terrible," said Mr. Harper, with a serious emphasis, ". . . and I think the Director would be really grateful to us if we got some powder and shot ready for him. Now it would be a good thing if we had some idea of how they handle Circumvention elsewhere. I thought you might begin by calling at the Manx Office and getting some facts from them."

"Right," Cyril replied, "I will."

"Very well," said Mr. Harper. "Choop is the man to ask for. You'll find him a pleasant kind of fellow. Do you think you could go this afternoon ?" Cyril leapt at the opportunity of evading the attention of his clerks.

"I'll go at once," he promised. As he went back through the corridor, he saw Miss Mainwaring, through the open door of her room, apparently deep in the enjoyment of some exquisite jest with Daphne Phyllis. Their heads were together and they whispered and giggled by turns. He looked quickly away and hurried on.

XXI

Presently Cyril found himself in Whitehall under a depressing and threatening sky. He was not very clear where the Manx Office was to be found, but he thought it must be next to the Local Government Board. However, it was not. Gradually the realisation came to him that he hadn't any notion where it was, that he had never seen it. Strange! It was, was it not, a place of importance? He had pictured it as a huge and terrible building, dark and sinister as the Bastille, fit harbour for the resolute and iron-handed men who alone in the British bureaucracy understood the secret of strong government. Only in such a place could the orders have been drawn up which crushed the Manx Rebellion of Whitsun Week. But a moment's clear thought told him that there was no such building in Whitehall. The assault which the Home Office made on his sensibilities roused in him emotions rather of æsthetic horror than of awe. Treasury Chambers looked like a short stout gentleman of the Victorian period, with side-whiskers. The War Office looked like a newly-rich munitions profiteer giving a dinner. Nowhere was there such a building as he had imagined. He hardly dared consult the policeman on point duty close by, for fear of being thought a Manxman of rebellious leanings and vindictive intentions. The policeman, however, said only:

"It's in Little William Street. You'll know it by the brass plate on the door."

"The brass plate on the door?" asked Cyril, a little puzzled. He had begun to suppose that the Manx Office was purposely hidden, the better to safeguard its dreaded and hated officials from the vengeance of their enemies. But the policeman firmly repeated what he had said; and Cyril set out to find Little William Street.

It proved to be made up of small and respectable Georgian houses, at one of which a grocer's cart was pausing to deliver half a dozen bottles of soda-water. There were no machine-guns in sight, no detachments of troops. There were not even any plain-clothes men loitering purposefully about, for, when the grocer had completed his mission by embarking the empties, and had driven rapidly away, the street was quite empty. Cyril proceeded down it, looking for a brass plate; and at length on the railings outside a small and respectable house, in no other way distinguished from the rest, he saw a brass plate plainly inscribed with the words, "Manx Office." He paused a moment, finding the appearance of the closed door a trifle unfamiliar in a Government department. At last he went up the steps and pushed at the door. It was locked; and another brass plate requested the visitor not to ring unless he required an answer.

Cyril therefore rang and waited. After several minutes, feeling his desire for an answer still undiminished, he rang again. A prodigious interval went by; and then he heard an uncertain shuffle of feet approaching the door from the inside. There followed the sound of bolts being pushed back and chains undone, mixed with the heavy groans of a lethargic person stirred to uncongenial activity. At last the door fell open and Cyril beheld an elderly man in shirt-sleeves, with no collar, who stood rubbing his eyes and blinking, presumably at the unaccustomed light.

" Is Mr. Choop in ? " Cyril asked politely.

" Mr. Choop ? " the porter repeated. " Mr. Choop ? Is 'e in ? I'll go and see. Just you wait there." Cyril advanced into the semi-darkness of the hall and waited, while the porter lumbered into the complete darkness of the stairs and was lost to sight, though not to hearing. After several minutes he returned and said in a dull voice :

" Yes, Mr. Choop, 'e's in." After this he seemed to expect that Cyril would go away. Perhaps he thought that the visitor was collecting information for a column of Society Chatter.

" Well, can I see him ? " Cyril asked, rather impatiently.

" Can you *see* 'im ? I dunno. I'll go and ask 'im. Just you wait there." And the porter was again withdrawn from Cyril's sight for a considerable interval. When he came back he said :

" Yes, 'e'll be very glad to see you. You go up on to the second . . ." (here he stifled a yawn and proceeded in an exhausted manner) " on to the second floor and you'll see 'is room all right." Cyril thanked him and adventured into the blackness of the stairs. On the second floor there was a little light ; and he saw a door bearing a card which showed the name of Mr. Augustus Choop, M.V.O. He knocked, and entered on the invitation of a drowsy voice. After a moment or two, he perceived, across the thick air of a room apparently sealed at all its exits and powerfully heated, a short middle-aged gentleman sitting in a leather arm-chair and comfortably extending his feet to a great fire of coal and logs.

"Mr. Choop?" Cyril inquired. That gentleman nodded an affirmative and invited his visitor to take a pew and draw up to the warmth. Cyril obeyed, flinching a little from the withering heat of the fire, and began to explain that he came from the Circumvention Branch of the Circumlocution Office, that Mr. Harper had asked him——

"Just so, just so," mumbled Mr. Choop, languidly picking up a box of cigarettes from the floor beside his chair and offering it to Cyril, who took one and began to fumble for a match, resuming at the same time his explanation that he was in search of certain facts——

"Don't use a match!" cried Mr. Choop, with more animation. "Here's my lighter." He produced the instrument from a trouser-pocket which, owing to his girth and his position, he had some difficulty in reaching, and began to manipulate the striker. "Wonderful things, these," he continued in an indistinct voice. "Wouldn't be without one for all you could offer me. I bought this one in Douglas two years ago"—(here he injured himself with the apparatus, stared at it a moment ferociously and resumed)—"for eighteenpence and I don't suppose you could guess what it's saved me in matches since. Now, could you?" Cyril admitted that he could not. "Well," said Mr. Choop, "as it happens, I worked it out this morning to pass the time. I've got the figures somewhere." He got up with dignity, went to a desk that stood obscurely in a corner and routed about for some time among his papers. Presently he handed to Cyril a sheet of official minute-paper, on which he had neatly set out the number of matches he might have used in two years, with an estimate of their cost, and, in the contra account, the original cost of the lighter with an allowance for flints, wicks and petrol for its upkeep. The calculation showed a considerable balance in his favour. " There," he said, sitting down, " that shows you." And with an air of satisfaction, he began again to dash the striker against the flint.

" I wanted to ask you," Cyril began again, in a rather hopeless manner.

" Come from the Circumvention Branch, didn't you say ? " interrupted Mr. Choop, stressing his words in time with the blows he continued to deal to his Promethean instrument. " Where's your lot housed now ? " Cyril told him in Transatlantic Chambers, and tried again——

" Ah," said Mr. Choop briskly, " I know. I remember passing it one day and seeing all the young women coming out. But you know you're frightfully overstaffed." At this moment, his efforts, which Cyril had almost forgotten, bore sudden fruit ; and the lighter, wearied or intimidated by the cudgelling it had received, burst into a flame five feet high, crowned by a column of dense black smoke and emitting showers of sparks. Cyril gingerly lit his cigarette at the portent,

" Wonderful little invention ! " said Mr. Choop, blowing, like Æolus on an old map, to put it out. " Don't know where I should be without it." He continued alternately to blow and to descant on the merits of his lighter. Cyril, rendered drowsy by the rhythmic alternation and by the heat of the room, began to dream dreams. He dreamed, to be precise, that if he got back soon he might catch Miss Mainwaring, after the other occupants of her room had gone, and in the loneliness of that propitious moment—he was awakened by Mr. Choop saying :

" Now tell me, how many people have you really got over there in Transatlantic Chambers ? "

" Oh, somewhere about six hundred," Cyril replied, glancing surreptitiously at his watch. It seemed to indicate half-past five, as near as he could discern through the film of lampblack which was descending from the now extinguished lighter. He rose hurriedly to go.

" Six hundred ! " cried Mr. Choop. " Well, listen to that now ! Do you know that another man here and I, and a couple of boy clerks, and a dozen or so fellows over in the Castle at Douglas, govern the Isle of Man ? " At another time Cyril might have been surprised by Mr. Choop's ignorance of the criticism which in many quarters had been levelled against him and his colleagues. But now he cared only for getting away and muttered as much in a decisive manner.

" Well, I'm sorry you must go," said Mr. Choop, who appeared to be growing more and more wakeful as the conversation went on. " I've enjoyed our chat so much. Do drop in again when you're passing. Always glad to help you, you know."

Cyril thanked him and plunged recklessly down the stairs and out into a cold and copious storm of rain. By the time he reached Transatlantic Chambers he was wet through, Miss Mainwaring had gone home and he was already beginning to sneeze. Simultaneously he realised that he had learnt really very little about Circumvention in the Isle of Man.

As he lay in bed next morning agonisedly enduring the mustard-plaster which his mother had affixed to his chest and sipping a disagreeable compound of egg and milk, he found it a comfort in his affliction that he would not be now obliged to write a memorandum on that difficult subject for what was already beginning to be known and feared as the Towle Committee.

XXII

DURING Cyril's absence, a number of his associates who were not fortunate enough to have contracted colds on the chest envied him his luck. It rained continuously. The wind of the Committee's approach grew louder and more menacing. Under the combined stresses of bad weather and apprehension the degree of nerve-strain attained by responsible persons in Transatlantic Chambers was something hitherto unheard of. Mr. Harper grew so desperate as to apply for his own release for the Army. But for the fact that, with characteristic caution even in his recklessness, he applied for release to a quarter which was not authorised to deal with such applications, his request might have been granted, so universal was the ill-natured desire to take it out of someone.

On one dismally damp and foggy morning of that period, Mr. Evans began the day's work by having to run to catch a bus and by dropping his umbrella in the mud. Fate compelled him to run again to catch a train and, acting with peculiar malignancy, made him cover the last two hundred yards for Transatlantic Chambers at a sharp trot, having damaged the mechanism of the umbrella, which refused to open, and brought on an especially heavy shower. He arrived at his office feeling much warmer than was warranted by the state of the weather.

His table, as he found without surprise, but with much resentment, was covered to a depth of three feet in newly arrived papers. One of his boy clerks had very thoughtfully cleared for him a space of eight inches by ten, in which he might get on with the management of the country. He hung up his dripping overcoat and hat, flung the offending umbrella spitefully on the floor and drew his chair to the table. Then with the characteristic gesture of the bureaucrat, he pushed all the papers a little further away from him. The telephone fell off the back of the table with a crash. Mr. Evans rose and replaced it in abstracted silence. The papers he was examining had an arrestingly familiar look.

He was beginning to identify them when the telephone rang. He leaned towards the almost inaccessible instrument over a mound of papers and yelled mournfully into the mouthpiece. " Are you there ? " said a delicately modulated voice. " Did you call me ? " Mr. Evans denied it with indignation. " You took the receiver off the hook a moment ago," the voice continued, sweetly but reprovingly. " Will you replace it now, please ? " Mr. Evans did so.

He returned to his papers and resumed the doleful business of recognition. Mr. Burnet was leaving that night to attend a conference in Paris and, as a preliminary measure, had sent back a choice selection from the files which Mr. Evans had submitted for him for decision during the past three months. " He must have stayed late last night getting all these done," Mr. Evans murmured to himself with ill-founded optimism. But as he turned them over he felt like the keeper of a casual ward who re-admits at intervals, without cordiality, all the old familiar faces. These were, without doubt, familiar. There was the man at South Shields—he must have filed his petition long ago. There was really no need to trouble about him any further. Mr. Burnet, apparently, had not troubled. There was the case of the Manganese and Magneto Company, however—a file which contained a letter from an M.P. and a minute from the Secretary of State and which was highly charged with all kinds of trouble for someone. Mr. Evans regarded it gravely and began to turn over the minute sheets. He could find no trace of any action on the part of Mr. Burnet. His expression of gravity grew more profound and he examined the file with greater care. There was also no trace of his ever having submitted it to Mr. Burnet. He had left it with the Assistant Director after a conversation, in which he had urged, and Mr. Burnet had accepted, the necessity for instant action, but he had forgotten to secure documentary proof of his discharge from responsibility for the accursed thing. As he realised this fact, the concern shown on his countenance grew painful to behold ; and there was a marked tendency among his boy clerks to find work which took them to the other end of the long room.

"Well . . ." he said despairingly at last. And, feeling that action was useless, he rose from his seat and drifted into the entrance hall. No sooner had he rolled into sight than the porter appealed to him. Mr. Evans glanced with dignified benevolence from the largely shining official to a little dripping and dejected man who stood pitifully holding a debauched umbrella and making pools of various sizes on the marble floor.

" Here's a . . . a gentleman, sir," said the porter, " who wants to see Mr. Blood." The little man murmured something unintelligible but confirmatory.

" Wants to see Mr. Blood, does he ? " said Mr. Evans, rubbing his hands together and growing more genial at the prospect of a task obviously within his powers. " And what is his business with Mr. Blood ? Has he told you that ? "

" I'm afraid, sir," the porter replied in a hoarse and confidential voice, " that I can't quite understand what he says." Mr. Evans wheeled round on the intruder and demanded with authoritative heartiness : " Well, now, can't you tell me what your business is ? " But he could catch nothing of the reply save the words " Lossiehead in Ayrshire " and a vague reference to " the Union."

" Well, I mean," Mr. Evans resumed, " Mr. Blood's a very busy man. So many of you gentlemen get letters signed by Mr. Blood and think that he must be dealing personally with your little affairs. I daresay he didn't even read the letters. Now——"

The stranger gathered himself for an effort. " Ah hae a letter here . . ." he began.

" Yes, yes, that's just what I was saying," Mr. Evans interrupted impatiently. " But you don't understand that Mr. Blood is the Director of Circumvention and signs a great many letters that he knows nothing about."

Desperation gave the stranger eloquence and something approaching a command of the English tongue. " Ah'm verra sorry," he said pitifully, " but I dinna ken hoo Ah can gang awa' wi'oot seein' Mr. Blood.

Ye ken yersel' hoo things are an' Ah'm tellin' ye Ah'm feart o' ma consteetuents."

" I beg your pardon," cried Mr. Evans, shocked to the foundations of his being.

" Ah'm tell' ye that Ah hae a letter . . ."

" Quite, quite," said Mr. Evans, confused but anxious to make sure of his ground, " only I didn't quite catch what you said just now, Mr.—er . . ."

" Mackay. Mr. Mackay. Ma consteetuents, Ah wis sayin', the rascals . . ." And the Labour Member for Lossiehead looked appealingly to this other servant of the public for the sympathy they both so richly deserved.

" O Lord," groaned Mr. Evans aloud, shaken past the limits of discretion and decency. " It's an M.P." Then, remembering the decorum of the Service, he recovered himself and ordered the porter to conduct Mr. Mackay immediately to Mr. Blood.

" An' what's yer own name, mister ? " inquired Mr. Mackay with simple friendliness, as he was being led away. " Evans. Ay, Evans, I'll remember. Ah doot ye're fra' the Celtic fringe yersel'. Guid day to ye, Mr. Evans."

" Now what the devil did he mean by that, I wonder ? " Mr. Evans asked of himself perturbedly. " O Lord, I knew this was going to be a bad day." He still felt much hotter than the state of the weather warranted, when he returned to his own room.

By the end of the afternoon prolonged study of the documents heaped upon his table had engendered in him a frantic desire to be transferred to some other office, even if it should be the Office of Works, and there to begin life again, even if it were as a boy clerk. Civil Servants in desperation think of transfers as other people think of emigration or suicide. It was at this moment that he was summoned into the presence of Mr. Harper; and he answered the summons with a sinking heart. He had always kept as clear as he could of that striving young gentleman.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Harper," he said politely on entering the room. For he had his own strictly defined code of behaviour towards a Higher Division man, no matter what might be his private opinion of the individual.

"Hullo, Evans," said Mr. Harper, in a pleasant and breezy manner. "I've got a job of Burnet's here that he wants you to take in hand."

"This means something perfectly stinking," Mr. Evans reflected inelegantly. But his only audible remark was a request to be given his orders.

"Hammond's away ill, you know," Mr. Harper went on, "so Burnet thought you'd be the best man to look after this. It's a letter that was sent on to us by Evans of the Ministry of Housing. There are quite a lot of your namesakes in it, so you ought to be interested. It's quite an affair of the Celtic fringe." Mr. Evans winced at the phrase but took the letter and saw with alarm that it emanated from the private secretary of a very important personage indeed. He read as follows:—

"MY DEAR MR. EVANS,

"I am writing to you about Mr. David Evans, who is a graduate of the University of Llangollen. He has been very highly recommended by Sir Glendower Evans and Mr. William Brown is exceedingly anxious that a position should be found for him where the best use can be made of his capabilities. If you can do nothing for him in the Ministry of Housing, perhaps you will pass him on to the Director of Circumvention, who, Mr. William Brown thinks, certainly ought to be able to make use of him.

"Yours sincerely,
"EVAN EVANS.

"P.S.—I forgot to tell you that his military category is A."

Mr. Harper, watching the play of expression on the face of the fifth and least fortunate member of that great family, said firmly:

"Burnet thinks you will be able to find him a job without any difficulty."

"I—I think he'd be better off at the Ministry," Mr. Evans muttered hoarsely, "I—you know, I really come from Norfolk myself."

When he slipped again into the lift, however, he carried the depressing letter in his hand and regarded it with gloom. He felt that he was the most miserable and Mr. Harper now the happiest of men. But he was wrong there. Mr. Harper, left alone, fell into a fit of brooding. Daphne Phyllis came in on tip-toe and placed his tea at his elbow. He took no notice; and that discerning young lady retired to tell her colleagues that "Bill was in love badly this time."

But he was not. The truth was that the weather had affected him much as it had affected Mr. Evans.

His bath that morning had been disagreeably chilly; and, as he had stepped into it, he had reflected that he was nearly thirty-four and that he would be due for compulsory retirement at the age of sixty. This gave him only twenty-six years in which to reach the summit of his desires and he fancied that he had lost ground rather during the last three weeks. All through the day dark thoughts filled his mind and oppressed him with sinister suggestions. Perhaps he would never be Permanent Under-Secretary, never a K.C.B., perhaps not even a C.B.; and when his good angel whispered to him that the C.M.G. and the I.S.O. still existed, the mocking demons of melancholy arose and extinguished even this gleam of hope. At this time the Order of the British Empire had not yet been instituted.

Like everyone else in the branch he was desperately afraid of Mr. Burnet; but this terror did not kill in him the desire somehow to circumvent Mr. Burnet and reach the good graces of Mr. Blood. He had recently put in motion an ingenious device directed to this end. It had so far succeeded that he had been given a piece of work under the immediate instructions of the Director; and he could not hide from himself the fact that twice during the course of it Mr. Blood had called him a fool. And since this incident he had felt with peculiar poignancy Mr. Burnet's scowls and gruffness, the grunts with which he conveyed his desires, the abruptness of his manner. He fancied he had made an enemy there; and he trembled. He did not realise that Mr. Burnet's manner had not actually changed and was dictated by the fact that they had been working in close contact for less than two years.

So he brooded; and his women clerks in the next room discussed his hypothetical affairs of the heart, inclining rather to suspect the new typist with the bobbed hair. He was so quiet that presently Daphne Phyllis came in, ostensibly to ask if he had rung. She beheld him, somewhat to her surprise, on hands and knees under his desk. He turned an agonised face up to her; and his glasses fell off. She withdrew precipitately, her handkerchief pressed to her mouth.

"What's Bill doing?" Miss Mainwaring asked curiously.

"He's playing at bears," Daphne Phyllis replied, choking, but grave.

This, of course, was not true. Mr. Harper, growing listless in his gloom, had let a lighted cigarette fall from his hand. Fearing for the carpet, he had gone after it; and when Daphne Phyllis had entered and he had made a frantic effort to return to a dignified position, he had heard an alarming crack somewhere about his person. He extricated himself from between the pedestals of the desk and made certain investigations. It was as he had feared. Both trouser buttons at the back had gone; and, with a certain relevance, he thought of marriage. But that was a distant, as well as a desperate, expedient, and would not help him in the present case. Nor could he think of anything else that would. There were only three other men sitting on that floor. Cyril Hammond was away ill; and another, he knew, had already gone home. The third man was Mr. Burnet; and to ask Mr. Burnet for help in such a matter was a moral impossibility for Mr.

Harper. He thought of his women clerks and recoiled from the thought. He was just trying to make a belt out of his braces when Daphne Phyllis entered again. Mr. Harper sat down hurriedly, trying to look unconcerned, and, with horror, heard her say :

" Mr. Burnet would like to see you at once."

" Do you know what he wants ? " he asked hoarsely.

" I don't know, Mr. Harper," she replied, " but there's a lady with him."

Mr. Harper's mind leaped in a minute to the lady's identity. It was the wife of the Secretary of State, who had expressed a desire to see over the office and meet some of her husband's staff. He wondered whether there was any chance of being transferred to another department, realised that it could not be put through in time, set his teeth, thrust both hands deeply into his trouser pockets and began to shuffle along the corridor.

Mr. Burnet had been wondering meanwhile whether it would really be necessary to introduce Mr. Harper to the aunt who had called to see him off to the Continent. She was over eighty and rather deaf, and his ferocious diffidence gained the upper hand. Therefore, when Mr. Harper, a bizarre and uncomfortably huddled figure, appeared in the doorway he merely grunted :

" Just off now, Harper. Might send someone to get a taxi, will you ? "

Mr. Harper felt convinced that he was the most miserable and Mr. Burnet the happiest of men. But he was wrong there. Mr. Burnet thought for a minute that Mr. Harper's attitude was peculiar and that it was odd for him to lounge in with his hands in his trouser pockets. But this immediately gave way to what was uppermost in his mind. He disliked crossing the Channel at night and in bad weather ; and he had just learnt that his hated rival, the Director of Delays and Evasions, had been decorated with the C.B.

XXIII

It was not until the end of January that Cyril was permitted by his doctor to return to duty. During that long month he wrestled vainly with both doctor and parents, both of whom told him sagely and soothingly that he must not see his work out of proportion and that the most patriotic thing for him to do was to get perfectly fit before taking up his labours again.

"Look at me," his mother said with quiet pride. "I've given up the canteen altogether to look after you and I know they can't get on without me. I'm sure that Mrs. Elkins is giving the poor soldiers nasty cocoa. She never would learn to make it."

Cyril therefore languished at home and suffered to be spent on him the care which had formerly been reserved for the soldiers at the canteen. During this time he had ample leisure for meditation; and accordingly he meditated painfully. What, he asked himself, had become of Miss Mainwaring all this time? To be sure, he had received a box of flowers from her and Daphne Phyllis, which had rejoiced his mother as evidence of the respect in which his staff held him. And the card which had accompanied these flowers had revealed the secret of the "J." It stood for Joan; and this gave his musings a more definite point of departure. But he feared greatly the effect of Christmas parties and dances on that energetic young lady, when he was not by to counteract it. Might she not have met some officer on leave, some pathetic wounded subaltern, recovering from his hurts, heroic and appealing at once? . . . Cyril felt that his own return as a pale invalid would lack interest in any such comparison. He began to wonder whether he might not be taken for the Army after all. He wondered how long it would take to be trained, sent out, wounded and sufficiently recovered to be able to pay a visit to his old friends at Transatlantic Chambers. He would drift in casually and go to see Mr. Harper. Joan would chance to come in and see him . . . he would have lost an arm . . . the left, of course . . . and there would be a modest but significant ribbon on his breast. All this was pleasant to think of, but, on the whole, impracticable. He determined to make the best of what he had; and he was delighted when Lily, his sister, offered to see him to the office the first morning.

She was now a full-fledged driver in uniform and expecting orders to proceed to France. Cyril was very proud of her; and between the Tube Station and Transatlantic Chambers he leant ostentatiously on her arm. To his dismay, however, she refused to come with him further than the door. What was the use of being looked after if Joan could not see his pathetic weakness? But she was obdurate and left him. As he stood a moment on the top step Mr. Evans arrived, his eyes firmly fixed half-left while his body advanced to his front.

"Hullo, Hammond," he said cheerfully; and then, indicating Lily's retreating form with an appreciative flourish of his umbrella, he added, "Look there. 'Pon my soul, I believe they must choose those girls for their ankles.''

''My sister,'' Cyril replied, rather proudly. Mr. Evans was filled with confusion.

''I beg your pardon,'' he said, ''I'd no idea . . . I hope you don't mind . . .''

''No, not at all,'' said Cyril; and, after testifying to his own health, he inquired how it was with the branch.

''Bad, very bad,'' said Mr. Evans gloomily. ''This Committee . . .''

''Why, have they started on us yet?'' Cyril asked.

''Not yet, but they'll reach us very soon. And they've been giving the others a terrible time.''

''What are they inquiring into then?'' asked Cyril.

''Oh, everything!'' Mr. Evans cried, with a gesture of despair. ''Staff and salaries and men of military age and accommodation. They've censured Runter for retaining too many A men and Hoskins because his staff costs too much and Tupper for taking up too much room. And when they have a spare moment or two they just turn round and censure poor old Bootle on general principles. Oh, there's a great time coming!''

Cyril went on his way and found his own floor apparently in the hands of the despoilers. Gangs of workmen occupied the passages, were entrenched behind barricades of planks and assaulted the walls and doors furiously with hammers and more complicated tools. Cyril dropped in on Mr. Harper and, when he had reported himself, asked what was on foot.

''We're having a few alterations made,'' Mr. Harper replied, smiling wanly. "You see, the Committee's very keen on accommodation and Blood thought it best to make a few changes before they came. We're having some of the rooms divided. Burnet's moved into a smaller room this morning," he added, as though to prove that the changes were really serious. "It's a little room we've had partitioned off from one of the big ones. Don't go into it by mistake." Cyril promised that he would not and went to his own abode, thankful to find it not engulfed in the cataclysm. The emptiness of his deserted desk filled him with rejoicing and good resolutions. He told himself that he could safely spend that morning in idleness.

Presently, however, Miss Mainwaring appeared, her eyes just visible above a huge pile of papers. She deposited these on his desk, and when she had congratulated him on his recovery and told him that he looked very pale, she said:

"These are some papers Bill told us to keep till you came back. I should think most of them are pretty urgent by now."

"Good heavens!" said Cyril weakly. Miss Mainwaring laughed in a charming way and left him; and he set to work without enthusiasm to sort out the problems before him. Some of them were old friends; and gradually he began to feel an interest in what had been happening while he was away. The fascinating case of a woman clerk who had been transferred from another branch and, being accidentally placed on the pay-list of both, had drawn two salaries for several weeks, eventually engrossed him so that he forgot the time.

He was at last roused by Miss Mainwaring putting her head round his door and saying:

"I say, there's an awfully queer noise coming from Mr. Burnet's new room."

"What sort of a noise?" Cyril asked.

"As though someone were pounding on the door and then shaking it." Cyril dismissed the idea that it might be a psychical manifestation and volunteered to go and see what was the matter. Miss Mainwaring led him along the corridor and halted in front of a large, new-painted door, which was unmistakably rattling fiercely on its hinges. Presently the rattling ceased and a low rhythmical pounding was substituted, working up to a crescendo.

"That's queer, isn't it?" observed Cyril, surveying the lively object with deep interest.

"It is queer, certainly," Miss Mainwaring agreed, withdrawing a little and lowering her voice in the presence of the Unknown.

"I wonder whether it can be Burnet inside wanting something?" Cyril queried after a little time. "But surely he'd ring a bell for a messenger."

"No, he wouldn't," said Miss Mainwaring. "His bell-wires aren't connected yet, I know."

"Well, then, he'd shout."

"Can you imagine Mr. Burnet shouting?" asked Miss Mainwaring, with scorn. "It wouldn't be dignified."

"Well, then, perhaps it *is* him," Cyril suggested, his mind working slowly to a conclusion. "You'd better go in and see."

"I daren't," Miss Mainwaring protested. "He'd eat me if I went in without being sent for."

" Oh, well," said Cyril, " then I will." He took hold of the handle of the door and turned it. " It won't open," he cried, with an air of discovery. At this moment he thought he heard a voice issuing from the keyhole and sunk his ear in that direction.

" This is Mr. Burnet speaking," said a muffled voice, as though it were using a telephone. " The door's stuck and I want to get out."

" Yes, Mr. Burnet," said Cyril shakily. Even through an inch of newly painted deal that personality dismayed him and he could think of nothing better to say and nothing at all to do.

" Well," said Mr. Burnet testily, " please go and get someone who can open the door."

" I know," cried Miss Mainwaring, striking her hands together, " there are some Office of Works men about still. We'll get hold of them."

" All right," Cyril replied in relief and, stooping again, he breathed into the keyhole, " We're going to fetch someone, Mr. Burnet." He then hurried along the corridor after Miss Mainwaring and found her in colloquy with a phlegmatic shirt-sleeved workman.

" It ain't in our orders, miss," said the mechanic slowly, fingering the pages of a black and greasy note-book, " and if it ain't in our orders, I don't see as 'ow we can 'elp you. 'Ere, Bill ! " A small weasel-faced man answered the summons, wiping his hands on his apron. " Young lady and gent want a door opened. I can't see it 'ere, can you ? " Bill took the note-book and studied it carefully.

" No, George," he said at length, " it ain't there."

"But, really, you know," Cyril expostulated, "it's extremely important."

"Frightfully important," Miss Mainwaring echoed. George and Bill looked at her long and slowly and were perhaps impressed by her obvious earnestness.

"Well, George," Bill suggested, "per'aps we might go and see what it *is*."

"Yes, Bill, I don't see why we shouldn't do that," George agreed; and then he added, in a comforting tone to Cyril and Miss Mainwaring, "And if it's anything really important, why, you might ring up Mr. Moon at the Office of Works and get authority from 'im to 'ave it done." The party therefore rolled slowly back along the corridor and paused before the door which stood between Mr. Burnet and his lunch. George took the handle and rattled it once or twice. Then he bent down to make a closer examination. At length he straightened himself up and said to Cyril, with an air of reproach:

"Why, the lock's broke."

"Yes, of course," Cyril replied, with asperity, shivering as he thought of Mr. Burnet getting hungrier and hungrier, "that's just what's the matter, the lock's broken and we want the door opened."

"Ah," said Bill, contemplating the door with an expression of profound sagacity, "I expect the spring's slipped or something."

"Just so," George continued. "Well, don't you see, sir, that ain't an alteration, that's a repair. We don't do repairs, it ain't in our department. Now I tell you what you'd better do——"

"But surely you can open the door. It won't take you five minutes," Miss Mainwaring cried in despair.

"No, miss, it ain't our job, d'ye see?" George proceeded. "Now what you and the young gentleman ought to do is to ring up Mr. Bingham at the Office of Works—only it'll be no good ringing 'im up now because 'e'll be out at 'is lunch—you ring 'im up at about 'alf-past three and get 'im to send one of 'is repairs men round. 'E'll do it for you in no time."

"But——" Cyril began. As he spoke his voice was drowned by a rattling at the door louder than they had yet heard. He wondered whether the time when Mr. Burnet might safely be released had not already passed. Then there was a sudden click, the door opened and Mr. Burnet appeared. He bestowed a withering glance on the astonished group, muttered something unintelligible and went at rather more than his usual pace down the corridor.

"There," said Bill, "I *said* it was only the spring slipped. It's all right now." He twisted the handle two or three times to demonstrate how right he was. But Miss Mainwaring was already hastening back to her room with a handkerchief thrust into her mouth and Cyril was following her. When they were alone together, she recovered herself with an effort. But her composure lasted only a moment.

"Did you see his face?" she asked helplessly. It was some time before they both grew calm again and then Cyril felt that a kind of intimacy had been established between them.

"Aren't you going out to lunch?" he inquired, aiming cautiously towards a distant goal.

"I can't," she answered, shaking her head. "I've got to wait till someone comes in to look after this room. Daphne won't be more than half an hour or so."

Cyril assumed the attitude of a duke's heir taking an interest in the gardener's boy and appalled by the repulsive business of killing slugs. "I say, do you have to do that?" he said. "How rotten for you! I was—er—I was just wondering whether you—you couldn't come and have lunch with me."

It was said; but it had not left him in a fit condition to hear the reply. He gathered vaguely that his invitation was refused, but whether because of Daphne Phyllis's absence or of the proprieties or of Miss Mainwaring's disinclination, he did not know. Then he heard her saying:

"I shouldn't a bit mind sitting here alone if only I had something to do. But there isn't a scrap of work about anywhere."

Cyril hesitated, gulped and informed her as lightly as he could that, after that, he felt obliged to stay and keep her company until she was relieved.

"Oh, don't," she cried, in a polite but slightly injured tone. "I didn't mean that. Don't stay because you think I want you to."

"Oh, but I shall now," Cyril blundered on, completely losing his bearings and only half conscious of what he was saying. He sank into Miss Mainwaring's chair and looked up at her with a fatuous expression. She swung herself up on to the table in front of him and the conversation fell, as though it had been struck dead. Cyril grew more and more unhappy, but not a topic, not a phrase even, presented itself to him.

"This is a nightmare," he said to himself. "I shall wake up in a minute. Oh, how I wish I could wake up now!" Then Miss Mainwaring said abruptly, and as if in despair:

"Do you know what we call you in this room?"

"No," said Cyril.

"We call you Silly Cyril—Silly, for short."

"Do you?" said Cyril. It was the most intelligent thing he could think of. After this galvanic jerk, conversation's members again relaxed and its jaw dropped. After a yawning interval Miss Mainwaring drew his attention to a paper which lay on the table at her side. Their hands touched and Cyril recoiled hastily.

"It isn't really urgent," she said in a cold voice, and looked rather ostentatiously at her watch.

"Is it late?" Cyril asked.

"Daphne won't be more than ten minutes now," she replied politely. The tension increased and was broken only by the bell of the telephone which stood on the table behind Miss Mainwaring. Both of them sprang up from habit to seize the instrument and the movement threw them together.

Before Cyril knew what was happening he had thrown his arms round Miss Mainwaring and she was putting up her hands in defence and saying softly and seriously, "No, Silly, don't, please don't." Somehow the hands fell. The telephone made a last despairing effort and Cyril, removing his lips from the neighbourhood of Miss Mainwaring's left ear and letting her go, reached for the instrument.

"Hello! What is it? Who's that?" he cried wildly into the instrument.

"The caller's gone away now," said the operator mournfully. Cyril banged on the receiver and turned to Joan trembling. She was arranging her hair and looking at him mysteriously. "I say," he cried, "you *must* come out to lunch with me now." She continued to look at him without changing her mysterious expression. A good spirit enlightened him; and, leaning towards her, he made something better of the second shot.

"Will you come now?" he asked her.

"All right," she replied. "Only we must hurry before Daphne comes back."

As they sat down at the most secluded table they could find, Cyril murmured thoughtfully, "My doctor said I was to take the first day easy and not get excited about anything."

XXIV

When food was brought and set before them, Cyril remarked, with a reckless exultation rarely to be seen on his rather timid countenance, "I suppose after lunch we can go round telling everybody." As he spoke he endeavoured clumsily to secure Joan's hand under the table. She explained quite firmly that she required both hands to eat with and she further threw some doubt on the wisdom of the course he indicated. Cyril looked disappointed. He had reckoned on heaving an effective bomb-shell into the middle of Mr. Evans's complacent patronage.

"Don't you see," she said in a soothing tone, "if we announced our engagement I should have either to leave the office or at all events go into another division. We couldn't go on working together, could we? It wouldn't be good for discipline."

Cyril regretfully owned the truth of what she said.

"You see," she continued, "it isn't as though we could be married at once. We can't get married on your salary, can we?"

"How do you know what my salary is?" Cyril demanded in a dignified manner.

"I know the salary of everyone in the office," she replied, "and it isn't enough, with prices what they are now."

"My father would go on giving me the allowance he gave me before the war," Cyril murmured. "A hundred and fifty—but that isn't much and I know he couldn't give me any more. No, I suppose you're right, we can't be married at once." The admission plunged him into a state of deep gloom.

" Well, Silly dear," Joan went on, briskly maternal, " you may get promoted soon. There are going to be all sorts of changes."

" More likely that we shall all of us get the sack," Cyril observed dejectedly, " when this beastly Committee comes along."

" No, you won't," she soothed him. " Why don't you ask to be put in charge of a division next time there's one vacant ? Then you might get three hundred and fifty."

" Me in charge of a division ? " Cyril asked, appalled by the woman's ignorant ambition.

" Yes," she said decidedly, " I'm sure you'd do it very well. But until then, don't you think we'd better not say anything to anybody, so that we can go on together without being interfered with ? "

" All right," Cyril agreed with melancholy. " Only we shall find it jolly difficult to keep it dark." Eventually, as a first step, he consented that she should return from lunch alone and that he should follow her at a decent interval. But he only accepted this plan on condition that she should come into his room as soon as he got in.

She faithfully did so and Cyril embraced her enthusiastically. But at the crucial moment there was a shadow on the glass panel of the door, and they had hardly separated and had not regained their composure when Mr. Pyeblew appeared scowling.

" You've not seen Harper anywhere, have you ? " he asked darkly.

"I don't think he's back from lunch yet, Mr. Pyeblew," Joan replied with calm. And Mr. Pyeblew, who never took more than half an hour over lunch, retired with a blacker scowl than before.

"Do you think he saw anything, Joan?" Cyril inquired anxiously.

"No, it's all right," she assured him, and swung into her favourite position on his table. He sat down and possessed himself of her hand, for which now she had no better use. But as he caressed it, gazing up at her with an expression little short of the idiotic, she said severely:

"Don't be sloppy, Silly."

He replied with a pained look, and, just as he was about to speak, the door opened again and he dropped her hand as though it had been red-hot. Daphne Phyllis looked in and murmured:

"Bill's asking for you, Joan."

Joan frowned and answered, "All right, I'm coming in a minute." Then, when Daphne Phyllis had gone, she bent down, kissed Cyril lightly on the brow and left him.

"It's going to be hellish difficult," Cyril muttered to himself, "but I suppose it's the only thing to do."

As the days went on Cyril's appreciation of the difficulties in which he was involved was only just exceeded by his appreciation of his good fortune. Joan, who had counselled caution, displayed continually a certain recklessness, and he dreaded being found in a compromising position. It would be all so irregular . . . and especially when he wanted to make a good impression, so as to get promotion. . . . He had communicated this desire to Mr. Harper, who had received it without apparent scorn, but he trembled whenever Mr. Harper sent for him, lest some observant guardian of good conduct should have complained. . . . He half thought Mr. Evans suspected something. He wondered how much Daphne Phyllis knew. When Mr. Roker congratulated him on the attractiveness of his staff, he nearly sank altogether under the weight of apprehension. It was maddening to be in danger of being charged with philandering with one of his clerks, when in reality he was respectably engaged to her. All this so much oppressed him that it might have been a counter-irritant to his fear that he would not be promoted, but it was not. When he was not worrying lest his relations with Joan should be discovered, he was worrying lest his appeal should be rejected and wondering whether this paper that he had delayed or that figure he had quoted wrongly might not instead end his official career for ever.

The days continued to go by. All was comparatively quiet in the Circumvention Branch. The weather was fine; and Parliament was not sitting. Mr. Blood had been called away on a mission of urgent national importance to the South Coast; and Mr. Burnet had telephoned to say that he was working at home. The Parliamentary Under-Secretary, dropping in on a casual tour of inspection, had complained somewhat bitterly to Sir James Bootle on his return to the Circumlocution Office that there was no one there. In a manner of speaking, of course, he was right; but, looked at in another way, his statement was inaccurate. There were still over five hundred persons in Transatlantic Chambers, all labouring in the service of the common weal with degrees of satisfaction and contentment that varied quite remarkably in individual cases.

Cyril provided one of the most remarkable variations. He strolled one morning into Mr. Evans's room to pass the time of day and ask a little advice and immediately perceived that Mentor was engaged on the telephone. Then, judging by the pitch of Mr. Evans's voice, the redness of his face and the bewilderment in his eyes that something exciting was afoot, he took up the parallel instrument to listen.

"Empire?" said Mr. Evans angrily into the mouthpiece, as he did so. "I don't want the Empire. Why should I? This is the Circumvention Branch!" Cyril was a little surprised; but at that moment he caught a muffled explanation from the other end of the wire which made all clear to him. Mr. Evans, however, did not; and he proceeded to demonstrate how fallible are the senses and how true it is that we perceive what we expect to perceive rather than that which is.

"Empire?" he cried again, more angrily than before. "Two stalls? I haven't booked any stalls! I don't want any stalls!" Then, with a softening of his tone, "Well, what is there on to-night?" Suddenly, however, the line was cleared and Cyril and Mr. Evans both heard with equal distinctness a level and precise voice saying:

"This is the Employment Department of the Board of Trade. I am speaking for the Umpire under the Unemployment Insurance Act. I want to speak to someone about . . ." Cyril relinquished the tele-

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phone, feeling that the rest of the conversation would hardly maintain the level of its opening passages.

When Mr. Evans had settled with the Umpire, he looked up at Cyril, a frown momentarily obscuring the cheerfulness of his rotund features, and asked rather gruffly, " Well, what do *you* want ? "

" I tell you what it is, Evans," Cyril answered with calm. " You're being wasted here. You ought to go on the halls. You wouldn't need to learn to sing or dance. You'd make your name simply as a patter-merchant. 'Evans and a Telephone' would be doing two houses a night all over the country in no time."

" What's the matter with you ? " Mr. Evans persisted, regaining, however, his usual sunniness.

" I wish I were a camel," said Cyril gloomily, bringing his soaring mind back to his own deplorable concerns.

" What for ? " There was no large admixture of fantasy in Mr. Evans's nature.

" Well, you see," Cyril explained carefully, " when you disgruntle a camel absolutely beyond bearing, everything is so simple for him. He just tucks his head under his hind legs and dies."

" I don't believe it," Mr. Evans asserted.

" That doesn't alter the fact. It's vouched for by the most trustworthy travellers. When my uncle made his trip into the Soudan, it cost him a fortune in camels. He was about your weight."

" I suppose you mean," said Mr. Evans, toilsomely seizing on what appeared to be a solid truth, " that you wish you were dead ? "

" That's it," Cyril assented, without enthusiasm.

"Well, what for?" Mr. Evans didn't understand people wanting to be dead, especially when it was only an hour or so to lunch-time.

Cyril confessed with a sad countenance, "I've lost a paper," he said.

"Well, cheer up," Mr. Evans exhorted him. "You talk as if it were the first time it had ever happened to you."

"But the trouble is that I'm not sure that I have lost it."

"Do you really know what is the matter with you?" Mr. Evans inquired in a pained way.

"This is what it is really," said Cyril, unbosoming himself. "Hereward rang me—you know Hereward?"

"Good Lord!" said Mr. Evans. "One of old Smith's secretaries, isn't he?"

"Yes, that fellow. Well, he said the Secretary of State was anxious to know what had been done with a paper he sent over to us some time ago. Hereward didn't seem to know much what it was about, but he said it was something to do with the appointment of Sir Ephraim Hogg——"

"That sounds bad," interjected Mr. Evans. "One of his pals after a job."

"Just so. Well, he was so positive about it that I said I knew the paper, but I couldn't quite remember what I'd done with it and I'd tell him when I found out."

"If you've been sitting on that paper, young man," pronounced Mr. Evans with solemnity, "you're going to get into trouble. I don't envy you, I must say."

"But now I can't find the damned thing or any trace of it," Cyril cried wildly. "I'm certain I saw it—oh, a fortnight ago, because I remember thinking it looked a fishy business. And now I've not the remotest idea what I did with it."

"Have you looked in all your trays?"

"I've turned every one of them upside down."

"It isn't in the 'URGENT' tray, is it? You always get a mass of stuff that stays there for weeks. Have you looked in your drawers?"

"I never put papers in drawers," Cyril protested. "It says not in the Code of Procedure."

"Yes, but have you looked there? Well, you go back; I'm busy. I'll come round in a bit and help you to look for it. But I tell you, young man, that you're in for trouble."

Cyril returned disconsolately to his own room; but he found himself quite unable to settle down to any work. He wandered about restlessly instead, peering down behind the radiator and lifting up the edges of the carpet to gaze underneath. After twenty minutes of this he sank in his chair and fell into a brown study. Before him, unnoticed and uncared for, lay five papers whose yellow labels insisted screamingly that the attention they required was IMMEDIATE. Presently Mr. Evans appeared, slamming the door heavily behind him.

"Found it?" he inquired cheerfully. Cyril dejectedly indicated a negative. Mr. Evans turned and regarded with suspicion the row of trays which decorated Cyril's table. They were labelled IN, OUT, WAIT and URGENT; and all, except the second, were full to overflowing.

"Of course," said Mr. Evans, with a reflective air, "the 'WAIT' tray is where you put papers till it's time for them to go into 'URGENT'; we'll look there first." He looked, and afterwards in the other trays. He was no mean searcher. Any secret police would have found him useful for domiciliary visits, particularly those which are intended to strike terror into the soul of the recipient. Cyril watched him at first with alarm and then with resignation: lastly, he was obliged to give all his energies to collecting the typewritten sheets of a memorandum on Circumvention and Reconstruction, which Mr. Evans was ruthlessly distributing all around him.

After a very creditable imitation of a stout fox-terrier in a rabbit-burrow, the searcher looked up out of a heap of papers and said, panting a little and with his tongue hanging out, "Well, it doesn't seem to be here."

Cyril began somewhat mournfully to restore order, but Mr. Evans interrupted him. "You look after that some other time," he remarked. "What about the clerks?"

"I asked Miss Mainwaring," Cyril replied with a defensive air, "and she said she hadn't seen it."

"You and your Miss Mainwaring," exclaimed Mr. Evans contemptuously. "Come along with me and we'll talk to her." Cyril, a crushed and wretched figure, followed meekly in his wake.

Miss Mainwaring's room was nearly empty; but she herself sat there regarding a blank sheet of paper with a thoughtful expression. Daphne Phyllis was lingering near the door, one hand holding a stick of chocolate, the other with a finger inserted in the pages of the latest work of Miss Ethel M. Dell. When she saw the intruders, she remarked hastily, " Well, so long, Joan. I'm going to lunch." To which Miss Mainwaring replied, with one eye on Mr. Evans, " Good-bye, Daphne. Mind, not more than three-quarters of an hour." They all quite distinctly heard Daphne Phyllis's giggle as she disappeared down the corridor.

Cyril perceived with alarm a sketch pinned on the wall which depicted in a crude but lively manner Mr. Evans in a characteristic attitude at the telephone. He made an adroit movement and placed himself in front of it, much to the enjoyment of Miss Mainwaring, who grinned at him covertly. Mr. Evans, however, had no spare attention for such trifles. Ignoring Miss Mainwaring, who had now assumed the stately and expectant manner of a flouted hostess, he pronounced :

" I think we'd better begin in the ' WAIT ' tray."

" It isn't there," said Miss Mainwaring hurriedly.

" What isn't ? " asked Mr. Evans, removing a pile of papers from their secular abode. Miss Mainwaring asserted that she knew everything that was in that tray. Mr. Evans doubted it and didn't much care if she did. He continued to search. As he did so, she snatched a paper from his hands, saying defiantly :

" Well, that isn't it, anyway."

" Then what is it ? " Mr. Evans wanted to know. He retrieved it and handed it to Cyril, who examined the dates, did a little sum in his head, and could do no more than look reproachfully at Miss Mainwaring. She, who was now standing up and leaning against her desk in an attitude intended to convey her sublime carelessness of the whole affair, assumed a mutinous expression and said nothing. Mr. Evans continued his investigations remorselessly. At the bottom of the tray he came on a heap of crumpled little slips, mostly scribbled requests from other branches for papers committed to the custody of Miss Mainwaring; and, having examined them and noticed their various degrees of appeal, annoyance, frenzy and despair, he remarked, chiefly to himself:

"Like what you find under an old brick in the back garden, isn't it?"

"I still don't know what you want," Miss Mainwaring observed patiently at this point. "If you'd tell me, perhaps I could help you."

"It's a paper about the appointment of Sir Ephraim Hogg," Cyril explained, "sent over by the Secretary of State." Miss Mainwaring denied any knowledge of it; but there was a momentary faltering in her tone which aroused the attention of both Cyril and Mr. Evans. This was, however, merely a sign of a conscience that was permanently guilty; and they might safely have disregarded it.

Instead of doing so, they turned on her together excitedly and began to ply her with questions in a passionate duet. She affirmed, in reply, that she had never seen the paper, that she had last seen it on Cyril's table, that she had sent it in accordance with instructions to Mr. Burnet, that it had gone to the registry to be put in a new cover, and that it had been put away as finished. Having revolved like the agitated needle of a compass from one to another of these statements, she concentrated on a gallant effort to prove that they were all equally and simultaneously true, a piece of virtuosity in eyewash which commanded admiration but did not inspire confidence. Having rewarded her with the glance which the master of a craft bestows on a promising novice, Mr. Evans paraded a last time round the room, looked under all the tables, and remarking, "Well, it doesn't seem to be here," beckoned Cyril to follow him out.

He was about to do so but, as he was just slipping through the half-open door, Miss Mainwaring pulled him by the sleeve behind it, looked at him critically for a second, and then imprinted a light kiss immediately under his left eye, seriously disarranging his glasses.

"Don't be so grumpy, Silly," she said coaxingly.

"I say, Joan," he protested, in an agonised whisper, "do be careful! You know, Evans . . ." She relaxed her grip and he slid out. He returned apprehensively to his dishevelled room; but Mr. Evans, who had preceded him thither, seemed to have developed no suspicions. His broad and genial brow was wrinkled with thought, and he said:

"I suppose you really *did* get that paper?"

"Oh, yes," Cyril replied, "I'm sure of it now. Remember it distinctly. He was some kind of a pot, you know, only he was of military age and Smith wanted . . ."

"Yes, yes, I see. Well," Mr. Evans concluded, "no use bothering any more before lunch. Come and have some. We might get an idea."

Mr. Evans's lunch was not of a kind usually considered conducive to thought. He consumed a generous portion of beefsteak pudding, a slice no less ample of jam-roll and a tankard of bitter. He ate in silence, because he thought food more important than speech. You could talk at any time; but convention unfortunately restricted the taking of nourishment to certain hours of the day. Cyril's more ascetic meal was, however, not so productive of ideas as it should have been. When they sat at their ease, with coffee in large cups before them, it was Mr. Evans who returned, fortified, to the situation.

"You can't say you've never had the paper," he said suddenly, looking up from filling his pipe, "because you've told Hereward that you have. And if it turned up somewhere with your writing on it, you'd find it pretty hard to explain."

"Just so," said Cyril, through whose mind this train of reasoning had passed some hours before.

"Well," said Mr. Evans cheerfully, "you'll have to think of some other story. Don't be too romantic about it, though—you want something quiet and dignified. I expect you'll get into trouble anyway. I can't imagine how you ever keep out of it. We'd better be getting back, hadn't we? You've got a busy afternoon in front of you."

"Just so," said Cyril.

When he reached his own room he found Miss Mainwaring sitting on his table, swinging her legs and looking expectant. Daphne Phyllis, who was hovering in the background, broke off in the middle of a sentence, giggled and disappeared.

"Well," said Miss Mainwaring.

"Well?" replied Cyril, with as near an approach to gruffness as his gentle but perturbed spirit could compass.

"Don't be so silly about your old paper, Silly," she went on. "As if I'd lost it on purpose!"

"*Have* you lost it?" Cyril eagerly demanded.

She leant over, ruffled his hair and pushed his glasses askew on his nose. "I don't know," she murmured airily, "I shouldn't be surprised. I daresay I'm capable of anything." Cyril refused to be shamed into apologies and replaced his glasses with dignity.

"Confound the paper, anyway," he said. "But I do wish you'd be more careful, Joan. It was you that wouldn't announce our engagement because you'd have to leave the office and we should look such fools. I believe Evans suspects something—and if he thinks things, without knowing we're engaged . . . you know how he loves to talk . . ."

"Did it, poor thing?" she observed. "Well, it shan't be worried. I'll go and get on with my work." Cyril watched her gloomily without saying anything. Then she paused with her hand on the door-knob, and said rather viciously:

"I hate bad-tempered men. I've a good mind to get transferred to Delays and Evasions. Mr. Dawkins over there wants a personal clerk."

"You can't be transferred without my consent," Cyril began hotly. Joan laughed and slammed the door behind her.

"This is a rotten business," Cyril murmured to himself. "I wish I could think of a way out."

As the afternoon advanced, the necessity for a way out presented itself to him in an even more pressing form. He united Smith, Hereward, Sir Ephraim Hogg, Joan and himself in a general condemnation; and finally he abandoned his other work and tried to focus his memory on the accursed baronet. But was he a baronet? Cyril had a happy thought and sent for *Who's Who.* The fatal name was not there. That looked as if he were a recent creation, perhaps a K.B.E. . . . But then it might be a mistake. . . . The more he thought about it the more certain he became that the never-sufficiently-to-be-deplored gentleman of title was a baronet. He continued to ratiocinate on this basis until the clicking of his cerebral mechanism drowned the noise of the typists in the next room. Biographical facts floated gradually into the focus of his consciousness and the figure of the nebulous but menacing Hogg began to have a certain completeness. There was no doubt of it, he was a baronet and just under forty. . . . Now what were his talents? Business? Cyril thought not. A country gentleman? It seemed unlikely. Cyril had a sudden breath of inspiration. The intolerable Hogg had qualified as a barrister in his early years. And then the name of Dawkins returned into Cyril's mind; and he blessed Joan for it. Dawkins might or might not be in want of a personal clerk; he had certainly been for weeks inquiring tearfully for a barrister. What more likely than that Cyril, who had thought that the job looked fishy at the best, should have sent it to perplex Dawkins? He was at once convinced that he had done so; and, breathing a sigh of relief, he hastily scribbled a note, rich in verisimilitudinous details, to the expectant Hereward, acquainting him with the fact. He then sent it by a messenger to the main building, with injunctions to hurry. Smith might have been inquiring about it again; but he felt disinclined to discuss it with Hereward on the telephone.

This done, he applied himself to his neglected labours and ran through his papers, signing this and initialling that with due regard to the dignity of the persons addressed. Finally, he rang up the office housekeeper to remonstrate with her on the fact that his towel had not been changed for a fortnight. Cyril was indignant at this gross carelessness and dereliction of duty; and the housekeeper was loquacious. At last he ended the conversation with a cold: "It isn't your business to *think*, you ought to *know*." Hardly had he done so, when he was himself called on the telephone.

He took up the instrument and recognised Hereward's honeyed tones.

"I say, old thing," said Hereward, "I've been hanging on to the line for about twenty minutes to get you; but your switchboard said you were talking to some flapper and mustn't be interrupted. Sure you've quite finished with your soul-mate?" Cyril and Hereward had never met except over the telephone; but, by this means of communication, they had become intimate and devoted friends. Hereward had once proposed that they should lunch together; but they had decided on consideration that this might break the spell. They had therefore postponed conviviality until after the war, when their official relations would end.

Cyril replied that he had quite finished, and Hereward went on, " All right, old thing. I only wanted to talk to you about Sir Ephraim Hogg."

" Yes," said Cyril, with a sinking heart.

" Funny name, isn't it—Sir Ephraim Hogg? Damned silly name, in point of fact. You wouldn't think anybody could have such a name, would you?"

" No," said Cyril, " but I've just sent you——"

" Well, it's one of the funniest things that ever happened," Hereward interrupted. " You see, the fact is, there isn't any Sir Ephraim Hogg."

" Wha-a-t ? " said Cyril.

" No, there's no such person. It's just my rotten writing. I made him up out of the card-index."

" I do wish you'd talk sense, Hereward," Cyril shouted angrily.

" Don't you see what happened ? " asked Hereward, still chuckling. " I found a card with the number of a paper and what looked like the name ' Sir Ephraim Hogg ' on it, and I couldn't think what I'd done with it. Then, as I thought it over, I seemed to remember that he was a business man, one of the K.B.E.'s, you know; and so I thought at once, ' Well, I must have sent it over to poor old Cyril.' And you said you'd got it, so of course . . . "

" Do you mean," Cyril asked indignantly, " that you accused me of having your infernal paper without being sure of it ? "

" Well, you see, I felt pretty sure——"

" And who *is* Sir Ephraim Hogg ? " Cyril inquired coldly.

" There isn't one. What I really wrote was ' See

Estimates, No. 55.' You wouldn't think it, perhaps, but a five looks very like a G in my writing."

" I'm quite prepared to believe it," said Cyril. " I'm only surprised to know that it looks like anything at all. But look here, Hereward, I made a mistake about that paper, too. I've sent you a note by hand, asking you to tell Smith at once——"

" What was your mistake, my pretty boy ? I'll bet it wasn't as funny as mine."

" That doesn't matter now. The point is—has the note reached you yet ? "

" Hold on a minute and I'll find out," said Hereward. Cyril heard him crying " Algernon ! " and then a confused mumble of voices. After a little, Hereward returned.

" It's all right, old thing," he said. " It came while I was out of the room, and as it was marked ' Urgent,' Percy opened it. You said the old man was to be told at once, so Percy's just taken it in to him. He's in with him now."

Cyril did not thank him. He simply rang off.

" I wish I were a camel," he said.

XXV

WHEN the Committee burst at last on the devoted Branch in the height of spring, it carried terror with it and left ruin behind. Mr. Runter, Mr. Hoskins and Mr. Tupper were beginning to struggle about again and to stretch in the restored calm their bedraggled and injured wings. Dazed and unhappy, they stared, like shepherds on hill-tops over which the storm has passed, at the commanding peak of the Circumvention Branch, now obscured by the fell shadow. And the Circumvention Branch, which had had so long a time to watch the portent drawing near, trembled and moaned before the onset.

The first approach was harmless but menacing, like the earliest drops of rain blown by the gust before the edge of the thunder-cloud. Mr. Abraham Towle and his colleagues had determined, like the practical men they were, to study the problem on the spot and to conduct their investigations in Transatlantic Chambers. Before doing so, however, they instructed their Secretary and Assistant Secretaries to go before them and to spy out the land. Algernon was judged to be insufficiently articulate for this duty. Percy had an appointment with a young lady at a *thé dansant.* Hereward, therefore, ready as ever to use his vivacity and youthful charm in the public service, undertook the task. He ordered the hall-porter to find him a taxi, kept it waiting for half an hour and finally drove to Transatlantic Chambers. Mr. Blood was away.

Mr. Burnet, who was composing a memorandum for the use of the Committee on the relations between his own branch and the Directorate of Delays and Evasions, handed Hereward over to glean such information as he could from Mr. Evans.

In the interview which followed, Hereward very rightly formed a high opinion of Mr. Evans. He was impressed by the genial energy of that gentleman, by his inexhaustible stock of knowledge and by the breeziness of his conversation. Unfortunately he wrote down the facts he elicited on the back of a letter which his mother had entrusted to him, four days earlier, to post; and that evening, as the result of a sudden spasm of memory, he dropped it into a street refuse bin which momentarily deceived him. His preliminary account of the structure of the Circumvention Branch was therefore necessarily vague and even, in places, inaccurate. But he left no doubt in the mind of Mr. Towle as to the gifts and the importance of Mr. Evans. Mr. Towle's views on the functions and personalities of Mr. Blood and Mr. Burnet were, to say the least of it, decidedly sketchy; but he had a definite mental image of Mr. Evans and was already beginning to like him.

On the following morning, after a preliminary meeting at the Circumlocution Office, the Committee divided itself between two large motor-cars and proceeded in state to Transatlantic Chambers, under the care of two of the most enchanting young women who ever became cogs in the machine of victory. The car which contained Mr. Polperro was a trifle later than the other. The great financier found his intellectual serenity imperilled by the manner in which Miss Adeline Smith negotiated the confused traffic of Whitehall; and he was obliged to plead for caution even at the risk of delay. When all the members of the party were at last reunited they entered the busy hive and with no uncertain voice demanded Mr. Evans. Mr. Evans, however, alarmed by the news of their arrival, had no intention of seeing them, even to explain to them the impropriety of their demand. He gave imperative orders that, since Mr. Blood had not yet arrived, they were to be taken instantly to Mr. Burnet; and the messenger, having surveyed them with apparent dissatisfaction and dislike, beckoned them in proud silence to follow her. They followed.

While Hereward was adroitly shepherding the last bewildered member of his flock into Mr. Burnet's room, Mr. Towle was advancing with outstretched hand and saying solemnly:

"Mr. Evans, I believe?"

Hereward, peering over the heads of the disordered mob, was indignant to think that this insignificant person should be mistaken for his friend of the day before. He pressed hurriedly forward, saying in a loud and agonised whisper:

"No, no, that isn't Mr. Evans . . ."

"Not Mr. Evans?" exclaimed Mr. Towle, withdrawing his proffered hand and looking from Hereward to Mr. Burnet. Mr. Burnet coughed, scowled ferociously and began with reluctance to explain.

"I am the Assistant——" he said indistinctly.

Mr. Towle recovered his urbanity of expression and held out his hand again. "Ah, Mr. Evans's assistant!"

he said, with genial condescension. "I presume Mr. Evans will be with us in a moment, but I am sure——"

"No, not at all!" Mr. Burnet replied in tones of muffled annoyance. "I am the Assistant——"

"Pray do not apologise," said Mr. Towle measuredly with lifted hand. "I am sure that there are certain things you will be able to do for us while we are waiting for Mr. Evans. Now, perhaps if you could see that all these gentlemen are provided with chairs . . ."

While Mr. Towle, Mr. Burnet and Hereward were untying this knot, Mr. Harper was engaged in sending round the Fiery Cross. His attention had been caught by the sound of marching feet and he had peered into the corridor just in time to see the tail of the procession shuffling into the Assistant-Director's room. His keen intelligence immediately informed him that the enemy was delivering battle and he hastened at once to Cyril, not caring in this crisis to risk the delay that would have been involved in sending for him. Cyril, deeply immersed in a calculation of overtime rates, which he was trying to reduce to order by the help of an almost effaced recollection of simultaneous equations, was a little slow in grasping what was afoot. But when he had understood he started up and sped to do Mr. Harper's bidding. First he ran to Mr. Roker and beheld that hard-working official entrenched behind great piles of dusty papers, wearing the expression of a bored and overtaxed policeman maintaining but not loosing a prodigious block of traffic in the Strand.

"Wake up!" Cyril cried, standing in the door. "The Committee's here!"

"What's that?" grunted Mr. Roker.

"The Committee's here!" Cyril repeated, making a gesture as though the Fiery Cross were actually in his hand to be brandished.

"Well, I can't see them this morning," Mr. Roker replied stolidly. "I'm too busy." But before he had finished, Cyril had gone and was far away on a frantic perambulation of Transatlantic Chambers, calling on the inhabitants to show signs of life and industry.

He arrived last at Mr. Evans and had the disappointment to hear his news greeted with a calm, "I know that."

"Then are you ready for them?" he gasped, breathless with the efforts of his crusade.

"You bet I am," Mr. Evans responded with equanimity. "Come here and let me put your tie straight for you." And while he patiently laboured to adjust Cyril's tie as nearly as might be over his collar-stud, he continued, "I put the fear of the Lord into everybody yesterday so as to be beforehand and I only had to remind them of it this morning. Then I got rid of all the nasty papers and I've arranged some beauties, apple-pie things, where you can't help seeing them. And I've locked up that card-index in a cupboard . . ."

"Card-index?" asked Cyril vaguely.

"Yes, you know, the one you started, the one that's always wrong. . . . Oh, we're all in perfect order for them. I only hope they'll come to us quickly. It'll be a strain keeping it up for more than a day or two."

"It will," Cyril agreed. "I wonder how you can manage it even for a moment."

"I suppose you've got all your people quite square?" Mr. Evans went on. "Looked in Miss Mainwaring's wait-tray lately?"

"Great heavens!" Cyril exclaimed, an expression of horror slowly overspreading his face. "I never thought of that! Do you know, I never thought of that till this moment?"

"I didn't *know*," Mr. Evans replied gravely, "but I did think it likely." Cyril continued to stare into space without speaking while his features lost some of their temporary rigidity and began to assume a look of quite normal concern. At last, agitatedly fumbling at his tie and driving it again under his right ear, he leapt up and rapidly departed.

When he eventually went out to lunch, having seen the Committee precede him, he was dishevelled and exceedingly hot. He felt dusty, he knew that his collar was crumpled and he suspected that his trousers were baggier than ever. (He knew nothing, however, about the ink on his face.) Moreover, his ears were burning and he was suffering under a sense of unjust treatment impotently endured. Perhaps he *had* been abrupt in his sudden demand that Miss Mainwaring should tidy up her room and hide out of sight forthwith all the delinquencies of which, rightly, no doubt, but without evidence, he suspected. It *had* been perhaps excessive to demand that she should complete before the afternoon the "Record of Exceptional Cases," in consultation over which in his room they had found excuse for many minutes of exquisite dalliance and which was now three months or so behind. He could not conceal from himself that he had been tactless in rebuking Joan so sharply, when she had in her room a friend from another branch to whom she had probably been boasting of her responsible position and freedom from control. But, on the other hand, Joan had been unkind and unjust in replying, in the presence of this stranger, of Daphne Phyllis and the remainder of the staff, that, if he was not satisfied with her, she would like him to transfer her to another branch. Their first serious quarrel, he felt, had been unnecessarily complicated by being conducted before witnesses from whom it was essential to conceal just how and why it was so serious. And the kiss, which Joan had hastily and forgivingly bestowed on him behind a door at the end, might well have been seen by a straggler from the Committee who had got lost in the corridor.

He returned, a little fortified by grilled ham and lager beer, to find a chit on his table summoning him to Mr. Harper's presence. Thither he betook himself, with heels and speed, as the poet says, having now got into such a habit of hurry, that he was unable to go slowly anywhere. He found Mr. Harper performing in his popular part of an official ruthlessly capable and remorselessly efficient.

"The Committee want some information on various points," Mr. Harper stated, with the precise and cold enunciation which he affected on these occasions. Cyril thought that this was highly probable but said nothing. "I've promised the Director," Mr. Harper continued, a certain glint of triumph in his eyes momentarily spoiling the pose, "that we will get it for him by to-morrow." Cyril heaved a sigh. "Now just note these down to begin with. We want a memorandum on tombstones—you can get that from Pyeblew, and at the same time you'd better get from him all the figures about the South Westmoreland quarries. Then we must have a statement from Roker on his dealings with the Manganese and Magneto Company—you'd better ask him for a copy of the correspondence too, and just make a précis of it. Then we want a note on our relations with other Government departments—I don't quite know where you'll get that. Ask Evans and he'll put you on the track. I expect you'll have to run round a bit after it." Here Mr. Harper stopped to draw breath.

"Yes," said Cyril, to bridge over the pause.

"Then," Mr. Harper went on, refreshed and speaking more rapidly, "we want a list of all the staff of the branch, showing their positions, salaries, dates of appointment, ages, sex, military category and . . . and . . ."

"Yes," said Cyril, a little more heavily than before.

"All right," said Mr. Harper, "that'll do for the present. You'll be ready with those by noon to-morrow, won't you ?"

XXVI

At about half-past eight, Cyril looked up and out of his window at the soft spring evening and sighed. Then he turned back to his work and scribbled on dispiritedly for a few moments. Then he looked up again. Almost opposite him, on the other side of the narrow street, there was a lighted window in another office; and through this window he could see another suffering mortal pushing a sluggish pen across paper, making out a return of typewriters, perhaps, or composing a memorandum on the shortage of elastic bands. But as Cyril watched his unconscious companion in distress, the man rose, snatched his hat and turned out the light. Cyril felt lonely. He rose and began to search in a half-hearted manner among the confused papers on his table for the figures about the South Westmoreland quarries. Mr. Pyeblew had written them on the back of an envelope which was now lost. But his search was deprived of enthusiasm by a suspicion that he would not be able to read the figures if he could find them.

While he was engaged in this melancholy occupation the door opened and the head of his chief appeared, surmounted by a hat.

"There's nothing more I can do, is there?" said Mr. Harper, in tones which did not invite a reply. "Don't be later than noon, will you? Good night." He disappeared while Cyril was still gazing at him helplessly.

Presently the light went up again in the room across the street and Cyril stared at it with wearied interest. But he saw only a charwoman, vigorously picking up all the movable articles in the room and promptly putting them down again in different places. His interest deepened as he watched. This curious display seemed to suggest an explanation of what he invariably found in his own room when he entered it in the morning. He studied the charwoman intently and observed, with the emotions of a scientist discovering the vagaries of a refractory molecule, how she took the waste-paper basket and placed it on the table and took the ink-stand and placed it on the floor.

He was distracted by the sound of the door opening again behind him; and, turning round, he saw Joan coming into the room. She had in her hand several sheets of typewritten foolscap and on her face an expression of candid, almost naive, affection which he had learned to distrust. She also had a hat on her head and furs round her shoulders. Cyril felt like Casabianca.

"Here's the statement of staff, dear," she murmured, in tones of an unbearable sweetness. "Poor boy! you do look so tired." And as she placed the papers on the table she bent towards him and kissed him, in a tender and maternal way, on the forehead.

"Look out, Joan!" he cried, alarmed. "There's someone over there. People can see through this window, you know. . . ."

"Oh, don't be silly, Silly," she replied, still tender. But nevertheless he led her gravely across the room into a corner and glanced at the window to measure the angle of view before returning her salute. Then he asked her, wearily :

" I suppose the statement's all complete and watertight, isn't it ? "

" Oh, yes," she replied quickly, moving towards the door. " Good night, Silly dear, I must run or I shall miss my train."

" But is it complete ? " Cyril insisted, feeling that the forebodings aroused by her expression were probably justified.

" Well . . . practically . . ." she murmured reluctantly. " Only I couldn't find any C's at all in the card-index and I don't think all the T's were there . . ."

" Good heavens ! " cried Cyril, throwing up his hands ; and when he had recovered from his dismay, she had gone.

He sat down at his desk again and continued without enthusiasm : " The output of the South Hedderwick quarry in 1915 amounted to . . ." He was obliged to throw down his pen at this point and resume his search for Mr. Pyeblew's envelope. But he so little liked the exercise that he almost crowed with pleasure when the door opened yet once more and revealed the sturdy form of Mr. Evans.

" Still here ? " asked Mr. Evans genially. " It's past your time for going home, isn't it ? "

" Still here ! " groaned Cyril. " I shall be here all night."

" Dear, dear," Mr. Evans replied. " I hope it's not as bad as that. Are you getting something ready for the Committee ? " Cyril nodded, being beyond speech.

"So am I," Mr. Evans continued. " Harper suggested to Burnet that I was the best man to write a memorandum showing how the branch as it is now developed out of the pre-war branch. Nice man, Harper, isn't he ?" Cyril nodded silently.

"Yes, a nice man," Mr. Evans went on, rubbing his hands together, twisting the corners of his mouth and speaking in a studiously level tone that betrayed reservoirs of suppressed emotion. "A very nice man. . . . I like having him in the branch . . . but I hope he'll get promotion . . . or be released for the Army . . . or fall down the lift-well. . . ."

"I suppose we're the last people left in the building ?" Cyril inquired listlessly. He realised that the feelings which would rise in him if he began to discuss Mr. Harper would be too much for his exhausted frame.

"All but old Jenkins," Mr. Evans returned. "He's here."

"He on the same job ?"

"Oh, no . . . no . . ." said Mr. Evans. "He's staying because he thinks there may be a raid to-night."

"And what's that got to do with it ?"

"Well, he stays in case this building should be hit . . . thinks he ought to be here."

"What, to save his papers ?" Cyril asked, a little incredulously.

"Great Scott, no !" Mr. Evans exclaimed. "He wants to make sure that the right ones are burnt. There's some he's been storing up ever since the very first raid of all. It was like a new lease of life to him when the bombs began falling. He's got some papers that nobody *could* get rid of any other way." He ceased and reflected for some minutes. "I wish I could have Harper here when the building's hit," he said at last.

"I wish we *could* think of something to do with Harper," Cyril sighed reflectively. "It ought not to be beyond the resources of civilisation. We might poison his tea or . . ."

"No use," Mr. Evans decided firmly. "No ordinary poison would be any good with a man who eats the sort of thing that Harper eats. I've seen him."

"I know," Cyril cried, with the air of a discoverer. "I know the very thing!"

"What is it?"

"Why," Cyril went on, "I don't know why I didn't think of it before. My mother's just gone and taken up with Christian Science. *She* can deal with him, if we can't."

"How?" asked Mr. Evans sceptically.

"It's the simplest thing in the world. She just turns all the power of thought on to him and works for him——"

"We do that," Mr. Evans interposed.

"Don't interrupt. She works for him to be in the right place. She won't work for anything in particular. It's no good asking her to get him pushed down the lift-well. But if she worked for him to be in the right place, why, he might even be released for the Army . . ."

Mr. Evans began to chuckle. "I don't think that's the right place for him," he said between gasps. "Unless you got her to turn him into a transport-mule, he'd always have someone under him to be a nuisance to, and even then I wouldn't like to drive him."

"Or he might get transferred to another office," Cyril pursued, fascinated by the possibilities of his own idea.

Mr. Evans continued to chuckle until he seemed to be painfully convulsed with merriment. "Are you sure," he asked with difficulty, "that she can do all that just by thinking about him? Don't you have to give her one of his socks or something?"

"No, no," said Cyril with great seriousness. "I tell you that people always take up Christian Science when they're so desperate that they can't think of anything else. I'll get her to work on it the first moment I can. I'll make her keep at it every minute she isn't at her canteen."

"You do," said Mr. Evans. "But do you know what the time is? Quarter to ten. I'm going. Call for me as you go out, if you've finished first."

An hour later, Cyril, calling for Mr. Evans, saw him put the last full stop to his finished memorandum; and they wandered together to the entrance-hall and rang the bell for the night-watchman to let them out. But the bell had hardly died away, when another sound succeeded it.

"What was that?" cried Mr. Evans alertly.

"Oh, nothing," Cyril murmured. "I do feel so tired and fed up." The night-watchman arrived and threw open the door for them. As he did so, Mr. Evans held up his hand and said:

"Listen! there it was again. They've come."

"Oh, dear," said Cyril helplessly, pausing on the doorstep. At the third time even he was convinced; and a moment after there was a succession of loud explosions nearer to them, followed by a sharp rattling on the roofs and in the roadway, which came up the street, past Transatlantic Chambers and pattered away out of hearing.

"Oh, *damn* Harper!" Cyril wailed, his voice breaking. And then he repeated with reference to that gentleman a piece of florid prose which he had overheard from a Canadian officer in conversation with a taxi-driver.

"Say that again," Mr. Evans adjured him encouragingly. "I like to hear you talking like that. It sounds like a sheep trying to bark."

"Oh, *damn* Harper!" Cyril said again; and, as they turned back to wait in Mr. Evans's room, "I'll get my mother on to that job first thing in the morning."

XXVII

PROMOTION in Whitehall is an incalculable thing. There are two methods of obtaining it. The first is to make a great display of zeal and energy, to hurry, to bustle, to come early and to go late, and never once during that long day to allow the authorities to forget your existence. The other is to resemble as closely as possible an inanimate object, to do and say nothing—in a word, to keep out of the way. Either method is also equally likely to lead to disaster, disgrace and the loss of seniority. Enterprising persons sometimes take the gambler's chance of making themselves extremely disagreeable to their immediate superiors. Success in this adventure depends entirely on the job which happens to be going when the breaking-point is reached; and the difficulty of making the exact moment and the desired appointment coincide normally renders it unattractive to the bureaucratic temperament. But it has been practised with good results; and Mr. Hampole, the able and popular Commissioner of Lets and Hindrances, never used any other.

Cyril had not enough experience to decide on the course he ought to pursue. He succeeded in obtaining for Joan an advance of two shillings a week; but he recognised that this neither brought their marriage nearer nor even demonstrated his skill in the manipulation of affairs. Moreover, Joan showed a disappointing lack of gratitude. She thought it should have been three and six—not because she was avaricious, but because her friend, Miss Dovey, in Mr. Roker's division, had received that recognition of her gifts.

In these unfortunate circumstances, Cyril confined himself to aspirations, diplomatic suggestions dropped into the ear of Mr. Harper and unreserved complaints in the ear of Mr. Evans. But he got little hope from Mr. Harper and little sympathy from Mr. Evans.

"It's very difficult to do anything while the Committee's sitting," said Mr. Harper wisely; and Cyril understood that that active mind was busy with thoughts of quite another promotion.

"I don't know what the policeman a young unmarried chap like you wants with more money," said Mr. Evans. "Now if you had a wife and family like me——"

"Do you think I should get promotion if I were married?" Cyril asked rashly one day.

Mr. Evans fixed him with a considering stare. "I've heard worse reasons for it," he pronounced at last enigmatically. And then he turned the conversation by inquiring whether Cyril's mother was really getting on with the extinction of Mr. Harper.

Cyril was a little doubtful on this point. He had not dared to tell his mother that his designs on Mr. Harper were really hostile. He doubted whether, if she had suspected this, she would have lent herself to them, even though her intervention committed her formally to neither side. He had merely asked her to see to it that Mr. Harper got into the right place; and he kept to himself his own view of what the right place for

Mr. Harper would be. There lingered in his mind, however, a fear lest her impartial action should be tinged by the almost universal benevolence which had overtaken her since her acceptance of the doctrine of the power of thought. In any case, it was clear that her intervention had not yet produced the hoped-for result.

Mr. Harper, as Mr. Evans somewhat bitterly pointed out, was in an extremely flourishing condition. He was at once deep in the counsels of Mr. Blood and Mr. Burnet and constantly summoned to help the Committee in its deliberations. During these eventful weeks he was a sort of Iron Division, hurried from point to point in the line as the crisis required.

And meanwhile the two wars went on simultaneously. Cyril read with enthusiasm in his morning paper that the Canadian troops had swarmed over Vimy Ridge and held it. He went to the office and learnt that on the previous day the Committee had challenged two points in Mr. Blood's administration and that he had had no defence to make. The English advance was arrested at Lens and the French were thrust back from the Chemin des Dames; but Mr. Harper had been invited by Mr. Towle to lunch at his club. London lay defenceless before menacing squadrons of German aeroplanes; but Mr. Burnet detected a fallacy in the financial criticism levelled by Mr. Polperro and drove his point home. It was determined to bring all England's man-power into the struggle by means of a new combing-out; and Mr. Harper found a job for Cyril that kept him at work all night. The Russian Government fell; and the rumour went round that Mr. Blood had written his resignation. The strain began to tell on the nerves of all who were involved.

"No," said Mr. Evans wearily. "I don't think your mother's got the real evil eye. She's had weeks to put the hoodoo on that man and she hasn't done a thing. I told you at the beginning that you ought to give her one of his socks."

Only Joan stood by Cyril in his despondency; and, in his blacker moments, he wondered whether this meant that she preferred to be untrammelled, preferred her work in the office with the opportunities it gave her for long conversations, on the telephone or face to face, with young men from other branches who wished to inquire after papers that she had lost. If he had not had first-hand knowledge of her official methods, the number of papers that gave rise to these discussions, and the irremediableness of their loss, might have awakened unworthy suspicions in him. As it was, he hovered on the edge of jealousy. He could not but admit that it was useful that Joan should be able to turn away wrath from the division by the irresistibleness of her smiles. He suggested to her, however, that the necessity might be avoided by not losing quite so many papers.

Joan was more than a little indignant. "I don't lose papers," she protested, "I like you talking! More than half the time I'm getting you out of scrapes. And when it's not you it's Bill. I have to tell people the most horrible lies about papers that Bill's put in his desk, because they're so out of date he daren't let anyone see them."

"Does he?" inquired Cyril with interest.

"Yes, the left-hand bottom drawer," Joan affirmed.

"That's useful to know," Cyril murmured half to himself. He had conceived the idea of depositing there a few of his own hard cases one day when Mr. Harper should have gone early. But Joan interrupted his practical train of thought.

"I don't think it's fair, Silly," she said tearfully, "to be always grumbling at me like this. I'm sure I do the best I can. I don't believe you'd be so unkind to me if we weren't engaged. And everybody notices it."

"Oh, look here, Joan——" Cyril began.

"Only the other day Laura Dovey asked me why my eyes were so red and what could I say?"

"That must have been the afternoon you tried to smoke my pipe," Cyril suggested. "You know, the smoke *did* get into your eyes. I told you it would."

Joan gave him a look of contempt which changed gradually, like a dissolving view, into injured and pathetic tenderness. "I'm sure you don't mean to be unkind," she said softly, "but you don't know how unhappy I am sometimes."

"Oh, Joan, my darling——" cried Cyril, attempting the usual restorative methods. There was silence for some moments; and then Joan exclaimed that she heard someone coming. She did. It was Mr. Harper with a job for Cyril; and Mr. Harper found Cyril more than usually apathetic and stupid. He did not conceal the fact that this was his impression.

"Oh, Lord! oh, Lord!" Cyril groaned to himself when he was at last alone. He examined the papers which Mr. Harper had left; but he found himself unable to take any real interest in the victim of Circumvention in North Cornwall who conceived himself to have a claim for three pounds two and sixpence against the State.

When he reached home that night he roundly taxed his mother with negligence or inefficiency. She was distressed and sought to excuse herself.

"I'm so sorry, dear," she said, "but you know, my time's so occupied. There's Lily driving that horrid car in France and your father always going off with the Volunteers to dig trenches down at Clacton, where it's so dangerous. . . . And it takes me so long to look after them. . . . And then when I see the young soldiers in the canteen, I can't help working for them just a little. . . . And there's Mrs. Bell, who's so afraid of air-raids. . . ."

"Well, mother," Cyril remonstrated, in an aggrieved tone, "I do think you might do a hand's turn for me now and again when I ask you to."

"I will, dear," his mother promised. "I'll get up early to-morrow morning and give this Mr. Harper half an hour before breakfast. But, you know," she went on, looking at him doubtfully, "I can't work for anything in particular for him. I can't work for him to get more salary or anything, you know. I can only work for him to be in the right place."

"That's all right, mother," Cyril replied heartily. "You see that he gets what's coming to him and I won't complain."

"Dear boy," thought his mother as she went upstairs to bed. "Never thinks of himself. He hasn't once asked me to work so that he shall be in the right place. And I'm sure that he would be higher up than he is now." But possibly Cyril's modesty was due to a profound belief in his mother's powers.

XXVIII

In these conditions, the luncheon hour (as that prolonged period of repose was officially described), which Cyril and Mr. Evans commonly spent together and at which Mr. Roker often joined them, ceased to be an occasion for jest and frivolity and was devoted to heart-searching and lamentation. Even Mr. Roker's presence, which ordinarily stimulated Mr. Evans to an ostentatious satisfaction with his own lot, no longer deterred him from the gloomiest admissions.

"We've missed the bus," he said one day. "There's no getting round these people; they've got us by the tail." Mr. Roker grinned scornfully and was about to speak, when the waiter interrupted him.

"Yes—er—oh, yes," Cyril muttered perturbedly. "Chuck me the menu, Evans."

"Roast beef and baked potatoes," ordered Mr. Evans in a sepulchral tone. "And, Henry—see that the potatoes are well done. You gave me things like burnt soap yesterday."

"Sorry, sir," the waiter replied, "no potatoes to-day."

"I beg your pardon?" asked Mr. Evans, whose mind was obviously only half engaged with what had once been his favourite pursuit.

"No potatoes to-day, sir," the waiter replied firmly.

"But, Henry——!" protested Cyril, halted by this news in the midst of his indecision between beef and mutton.

"*No* potatoes," the waiter repeated, as though he enjoyed saying it. "I can do you rice or Indian corn but not potatoes."

"I won't have either," exclaimed Mr. Evans, deeply outraged. "Bring me roast beef alone." Mr. Roker was seen to whisper quietly in the ear of the waiter; but, from his disappointed expression, it was evident that he had no luck. In a somewhat flat voice, he ordered fish.

"As if things weren't bad enough anyway," grumbled Mr. Evans, when they had all been served. "I tell you that we're done for. This blinking Committee is going to turn everything upside down."

"One hears all sorts of things," murmured Cyril, profoundly disappointed with Indian corn, which had sounded exotic and attractive. "Someone said they were going to stop all smoking in the office."

"Yes," Mr. Evans said, "and begin the office day at nine o'clock—and there's no telling how long the war may go on."

"And everybody's got to sign an attendance-book," cried Cyril, taking his part in the litany.

"There's only one thing," said Mr. Evans. "Harper's coming out of it all right and he promised to look after me."

"Oh, so you're depending on Harper, are you?" asked Mr. Roker, skilfully negotiating a complication of fish-bones. "You expect him to look after you, do you?"

"What else is there?" Mr. Evans complained. "He said he shouldn't forget to tell the Committee how much I'd done in preparing stuff for them. He promised I should get all the credit for it."

" He said the same thing to me," Cyril added. " He told me if I'd stand by him and see that he got the memoranda for the Committee, he'd keep my name before them."

" Oh, he did, did he ? " asked Mr. Roker.

" You know," Mr. Evans observed thoughtfully, " I think perhaps Harper isn't such a bad chap after all. I'm glad your mother didn't put the hoodoo on him, Hammond."

Cyril agreed. " It's a good thing it came to nothing," he said. " I must call her off. It'd be a pity if she did him in the eye now."

" It would indeed," said Mr. Evans. " He's all we've got to rely on."

Mr. Roker finished his fish, pushed the plate a little from him, sat back in his chair and surveyed his two companions with an inscrutable expression.

" Well," he said slowly, at last, " I suppose you can't have heard what's happened to Harper."

" Happened to Harper ? " snapped Mr. Evans, feeling chilled by the approach of doom. " What do you mean ? "

" Well, you know, there was a meeting of the Committee yesterday afternoon. . . ." Here he gazed abstractedly round the room and signalled to the waiter, while Cyril and Mr. Evans concentrated on him glares of anxious ferocity. " What was I saying ? Oh, yes, there was a meeting yesterday afternoon and they got on to Harper's own work. . . ."

" Yes, what happened ? " hissed Cyril and Mr. Evans together.

" Oh, Harper's come a cropper, of course. It was rather amusing. I thought you'd be pleased to hear it, only now you seem to have changed your minds about him."

"I might have known he would," muttered Mr. Evans. "I always said he was a born fool. Go on, Roker."

"You see, he presented the Committee with some figures about the staff. And Towle noticed that they didn't add up right and the averages were all wrong. Then they went into the whole business and the figures were simply hopeless. Polperro accused Harper of cooking his evidence to deceive the Committee and Blood and Burnet washed their hands of him and there was a general bust-up."

"Oh, my hat! those figures . . ." groaned Cyril. "I ought to have expected it. Why on earth did I let him do them? Of course, I might have known he'd make a mess of them?"

"*Did* he do them?" Mr. Roker inquired innocently. "I thought you and Evans had cooked them for him. Anyway, that was the impression he gave the Committee."

Cyril and Mr. Evans looked at one another eloquently. "I was full up with other things," Cyril said, "and Harper said if I'd tell him where to get the figures, he'd make out the statement himself. So I told him and . . . oh, dear, dear," he concluded helplessly.

"*He* didn't cook them," Mr. Evans stated bitterly. "He hasn't got enough wits for that. He just got them wrong. Any fool would have known that he would"—these last words with a vindictive stare at Cyril.

"Oh-h-h," murmured Mr. Roker, with a drawl that exquisitely expressed his willingness to allow the suspected persons the benefit of what doubt there might be. "That's as may be, of course. But while he didn't get the guilt off his own shoulders at all, he certainly did give the Committee the idea that you and Hammond had done the dirty work for him."

"What category were you in your last medical examination, Hammond?" asked Mr. Evans, after a long pause.

"C 3," Cyril replied dully.

"I was A," said Mr. Evans; and no more words were exchanged during the melancholy return from the Eagle to Transatlantic Chambers.

Cyril was not unused to find himself incapable of work after returning from lunch; but as a rule this resulted from a certain torpor of the intellect. To-day it resulted from an extreme intellectual activity. He could not interest himself in the debate as to whether Miss Amy Smith, girl clerk in Mr. Pyeblew's division, should be allowed leave with pay while her little brother had mumps. It was, he was ready to own, an important case, involving a ruling of probably far-reaching effect. Nevertheless, it did not engage his mind.

He had almost given up all hope of dealing with it that day when Joan entered.

"I want to talk to you seriously," she said, seating herself on the corner of his desk. Cyril assented with a faint heart. His own frame of mind was serious; and if she had announced her intention of talking to him frivolously, he would no doubt have been annoyed.

But he felt that his own concerns were serious enough, without having Joan's added to them.

"I've been thinking it out, dearest," she went on with downcast eyes, "and I've come to the conclusion that we shouldn't need so much to get married on. You're getting two hundred and fifty now, aren't you?"

"Yes," said Cyril, wondering how long that would continue.

"Well, my people would give me fifty pounds a year, and suppose your people gave us the same—and of course you do sometimes make some money out of your pictures, don't you?"

"Yes," said Cyril, speculating on the leisure for painting that was allowed to a private in the Army Pay Corps.

"And I've worked it out that we could be quite comfortable on less than five hundred, so you see you'll only need to get a rise of a hundred a year and then we can be married at once."

"How splendid that is, darling," said Cyril, looking at her haggardly. "It makes it seem quite close."

"Yes, doesn't it?" murmured Joan. "Now you know exactly what you have to work for. As soon as you get three hundred and fifty a year, we can announce our engagement and I can leave the office and begin to get my trousseau ready." After this pronouncement, she slid to the ground, threw her arms round his neck, kissed him heartily and left him. Cyril sat on, wondering whether he had seemed lacking in enthusiasm.

When he went to bed that night (after informing his mother that further attention to Mr. Harper was not needed and might even prove fatal), he was so absorbed that he forgot to notice the important fact that the following day was the 3rd of June.

XXIX

ON the morning of the 3rd of June, Algernon, Percy and Hereward arrived comparatively early at Transatlantic Chambers in order to prepare for a meeting of the Committee. They repaired to the room set aside for this purpose; and while Algernon, sitting in a chair by the window, saw earnestly to the cleaning of his pipe, his more active brothers assured themselves that the places at which the members of the Committee were to sit were each provided with pens, ink, blotting-paper, pencils and memorandum-blocks. This duty occupied them for some minutes; and when it was accomplished the first members of the Committee had still not arrived. Hereward, therefore, began to fill in the period of waiting by turning over the pages of *The Times*.

He had looked through one or two sheets with a slightly bored expression when something suddenly caught his eye. He bent over the paper and his attitude of fatigue was changed for one of acute interest. After a minute, he whistled long and shrill, and cried:

"I say, Percy, do come and look at this."

Percy slouched languidly to his side and examined the closely printed column. Then he, too, assumed an attitude of interest.

"Lord bless us!" he murmured. "Whatever next?"

"Pretty rich, isn't it?" said Hereward.

Percy assented emphatically. "But, I say," he exclaimed, as a thought occurred to him, " shan't we have to do something about it ? "

" Don't see what difference——" Hereward began ; and then he paused and considered. " Of course it does," he decided at length. " But the devil of it is that we don't know their beastly names."

" Nor we do," Percy agreed ; and, turning to his absorbed elder brother, he cried, " Wake up, Algernon, do ! What's Mr. Towle's Christian name ? "

" I don't know," Algernon replied, unmoved—adding with a prodigality of speech quite unusual in him, " And I don't want to know."

" But you'll have to know," Hereward argued. " What are you going to call him ? "

" Never call him anything," grunted Algernon.

Percy and Hereward recognised the truth of this boast. Algernon had, in fact, never yet addressed a remark of any sort to any member of the Committee. But it was otherwise with them ; and they resumed their perplexed study of *The Times*.

" Anyway," Hereward observed hopefully, " it does give you their initials. That ought to be some kind of help."

" You can't call a man by his initials," Percy objected. " He'd think you were being funny with him."

Hereward disregarded this. " Towle is A.," he went on. " I wonder what that could be. Arthur . . . Alan . . . Aaron . . . Alastair. . . ."

" Polperro's M.," murmured Percy. " You can choose what you like from Martin, Montagu, Montmorency, Maximilian, Meshach. . . ."

"And there's Blood, too," Hereward said, indicating another part of the page. "He's W. This is most damnably difficult. But I know what I'm going to do. I shall call them all SIR JOHN."

On this resonant cue, the door opened and the Director of Circumvention entered. Percy and Hereward turned to greet him, hesitated, and stood silent with open mouths.

"Good morning," said the Director crisply.

"G-good morning, S-s-sir John," replied Percy, putting his unwilling spirit hard at the fence.

"My name is William," the Director answered with severity; and he turned to Hereward in a manner which was calculated to abash Percy. "I should be glad," he continued, "if you would be so good as to tell me now the Christian name of each member of your Committee so that I may be prepared when the meeting opens."

"We don't know, Sir—er—oh, yes, Sir William," Hereward complained. "That's just what we were talking about. But I tell you what we're going to do ourselves," he went on, leaning over the table towards Sir William in a confiding manner, "we're going to call them all Sir John."

Sir William glared at him for a moment with terrifying effect, wheeled round and marched smartly out of the room.

The silence which ensued and reigned until the members of the Committee began to arrive was oppressive. It was broken at last by the sounds naturally resulting from two stout gentlemen attempting to enter the same door at the same time.

"I beg your pardon, Sir—Sir—Sir——" stuttered Mr. Polperro.

"Not at all, Sir—Sir—Sir," mumbled Mr. Whale.

"Good morning, Sir John," cried Percy and Hereward heartily in unison. Mr. Whale and Mr. Polperro looked at them and then at one another with a light of relief in their eyes.

"I beg your pardon, Sir John," they said distinctly, also in unison.

As they spoke, and as the sound came into the room of other members advancing up the corridor, Hereward visibly started and clapped a hand to his brow, a gesture indicating that he had been visited by a brilliant idea. Then, relaxing his posture, he snatched up an agenda paper, produced a fountain-pen and pushed these objects obtrusively under the notice of Mr. Whale.

"As it's the last meeting of the Committee, Sir—er—Sir—hm—hrm," he murmured indistinctly and hurriedly, "my brothers and I thought perhaps the members wouldn't mind autographing the agenda paper for us to keep as a souvenir."

"Why, certainly, I'm sure," Mr. Widgeon replied, taking the pen and paper and beaming on the intelligent lad. Hereward had just time to exhibit triumphantly to Percy the autographs of Sir Theophilus Whale and Sir Moritz K. Polperro before the remainder of the Committee arrived in a body. When it did so, he flitted from member to member, using so adroitly his pen and his charming boyish eagerness that he had secured all the necessary signatures in a moment, before he had encountered any difficulties.

Then he resumed a calmer air and moved again to each member in turn, saying with his ingenuous good nature, "I ought to have congratulated you, Sir Moritz . . . may we offer you our felicitations, Sir Theophilus . . . we were so glad to know, Sir Benjamin . . . so well deserved, if I may say so, Sir Edward . . . so very gratifying, Sir Alfred . . . a special pleasure to *us*, Sir Abraham."

The youth's ready tact had supplied the last drop that was necessary in the cup of these worthy gentlemen. When they had arranged themselves round the table and the confusion of their first greetings had cleared away, it was seen that each was beaming with unconcealed pleasure and that the face of their Chairman, Sir Abraham Towle, bore an expression of seraphic benevolence. So strongly was this feeling diffused through the air of the room that Sir William Blood, entering, was immediately affected by it and relaxed his pose of reserved hostility.

"What's his name . . . quick . . ." whispered Sir Abraham to Percy.

"Blood, of course," Percy replied innocently, a little bewildered. But Hereward overheard and interposed.

"William, Sir Abraham," he said hurriedly, "but he intends to be called Sir Willy."

"Good morning, Sir Willy," boomed Sir Abraham, stentorian and majestical. "May I, in the name of the Committee, offer you our very hearty congratulations?" For the good man on this morning of mornings bore the Director of Circumvention no ill-will, though he had been rewarded himself by no more than a K.B.E., while the Civil Servant had, in his judgment, been overpaid by a K.C.B.

Sir William seemed a little puzzled and taken aback by this manner of address but immediately recovered himself. "I thank the members of the Committee," he said adroitly, "and I should like to offer them also my very hearty congratulations." So saying, he advanced towards the head of the table, possessed himself unostentatiously of the document which Hereward offered him and took his seat.

"Well, Sir Willy," Sir Abraham continued, "this is, as you know, the last meeting of the Committee, and when we have discussed the last points on which we need your help, we shall proceed to discuss the report we have to make on your Branch. The report—hrm—will not be ready for some days, but I think it is only fair—hrm—to give you an outline of what we intend to say." There was a tense and impressive silence while Sir Abraham searched his pockets for a document which, when it was discovered, he tore into small pieces and threw into the waste-paper basket. Sir William watched him with an impassive countenance, in which a close observer might have noticed a darkening of the eyes and a tightening of the muscles about the mouth.

What report the Committee might have made had it reached that business on the day previous to the King's Birthday will now never be known. Nor can it be stated with certainty how much the effect of being newly and flatteringly addressed softened the hearts of that business-like and impartial body. It is clear, as I have already indicated, that the fruition of weeks-old expectations diffused an air of geniality and kindness through its last session. At all events, Sir Abraham continued:

"I need hardly tell you, Sir Willy, that we shall report with—er—with admiration upon your conduct of business. We have all been much impressed—I think I may say so, gentlemen?—with your—er—hrm—business-like conduct of the—er—business which you—er—have to—er—er—hrm—conduct." The Committee breathed a low-toned but hearty assent.

"So I think I may say, Sir Willy," Sir Abraham went on, "that we shall recommend that your—er—business-like procedure should be—er—properly recognised and that—that you should be given every facility for the—the—er—hrm—er—*conduct of business*." Here Sir Abraham heaved a sigh of relief; and Sir William's sigh, though internal, was no less profound. The Committee murmured its approval again; and Sir Abraham motioned Algernon, Percy and Hereward to proceed to the matters mentioned on the agenda.

"I thank you very much, Sir Abraham, I thank you, gentlemen," said Sir William in tones which, though broken with the proper emotion, were still suave. "Before we go further, might I revert for a moment to the last meeting . . . to that matter of the staff-figures produced by Mr. Harper?"

"Certainly," said Sir Abraham, a frown momentarily obscuring his benevolent expression.

"I will not keep you a minute," Sir William resumed. "I only wish to say that I am satisfied that the—er—discrepancies were due to an error on Mr.

Harper's part. I trust the Committee will not have a diminished opinion of him . . . a very capable and industrious young man . . . much overworked . . . perhaps even on the verge of a breakdown."

"Certainly, certainly, Sir Willy," rejoined Sir Abraham, benevolence emerging again. "Please give Mr. Harper our condolences and—er—tell him . . . yes, tell him—er—not to work so hard." The rest of the business went merry as a marriage bell. When it was concluded, the members took taxis and hastened away to lunch in restaurants in the City which they had not visited for many months.

Meanwhile, elsewhere, a less cheerful atmosphere reigned. Cyril sat alone in his room pondering on fate and finding himself still unable to offer any useful opinion on the case of Miss Amy Smith. But as he pondered the telephone bell rang. He took the instrument wearily and breathed a faint "Yes" into it.

"That you, Hammond?" roared a well-known voice. "Come round and see me, will you? I've got something to tell you." Mr. Evans said no more and rang off; but something in his accents seemed to deny the gloom of the day before. Without knowing why, Cyril felt an intimation that the shadow was about to be dispelled. He rose hurriedly and went out into Joan's arms.

"What's the matter, Silly?" she asked solicitously. "What are you so miserable about? I haven't done anything, have I?" Cyril waved her and her evil conscience on one side with a vague gesture and ran on.

He found Mr. Evans the personification of secure tranquillity.

"Well, what is it ?" he asked breathlessly. Mr. Evans motioned him to sit down and went on writing for a few moments. At last he looked up and said :

"The Committee's meeting now."

"I know that," Cyril answered impatiently. "What is it, Evans ?"

"Well," Mr. Evans continued, "the Committee may or may not report favourably, but that doesn't much matter to you or me. Do you catch on ?"

"No, I don't," Cyril snapped, irritation overcoming his naturally strong affection for Mr. Evans. "I do wish you'd talk sense."

"Sir Abraham Towle asked me to dinner at his club last night," said Mr. Evans simply.

"Wh-a-a-t ?" cried Cyril.

"Well, do you really want to hear about it ?" Cyril answered him with a look. "Then I'll tell you what it is. *Sir* Abraham has been made Controller of Hairbrushes and he has to get a new department together. So he's asked me to go with him as the head of a branch —he heard of me first from Hereward, he says, and he never took any notice of Harper—and I shall be on the eight hundred scale with prospects and . . ."

"Oh, Evans, I *am* glad !" cried Cyril warmly.

"You wait a minute, my young friend . . . and he asked me if there was anyone from here I should like to take with me, so I suggested . . ."

"Oh, Evans !" murmured Cyril in an ecstasy.

"And you'll have to work like the devil for four hundred a year," Mr. Evans concluded in his most practical manner.

"And that's really all cast-iron and water-tight?" Cyril inquired. "It's really going to come off?" Mr. Evans nodded.

"Towle will see there are no difficulties," he affirmed confidently. "We've clicked."

Cyril leapt from his chair, sketched an involuntary and inelegant pirouette and made for the door.

"Where are you going?" asked Mr. Evans.

"I'm going to get married," Cyril shouted rapturously as he disappeared.

"Mad!" murmured Mr. Evans, staring after him, "quite mad. . . . I suppose it's safe to take him. . . ."

Cyril had hurried in going to Mr. Evans, but he broke all records in leaving him. He flung himself into Joan's room and, with no eyes for any but his beloved, proclaimed proudly:

"Joan, I've got four hundred a year and we can be——" Then he became aware of the presence of all his staff, including Daphne Phyllis, and reinforced by Miss Dovey. His exultation broke and left him. He never knew how he got out again.

Presently he found himself sitting alone at his own desk in urgent need of some occupation to settle his mind. He therefore took a clean sheet of minute-paper and bent himself to the composition of a copy of verses, which he entitled:—

CUTHBERT'S APOLOGY

What if we are a bit ridiculous,
Who do our whack so far behind the line?
No correspondent comes to look at us,
Leaving our homes each day at half-past nine.

No Gibbs bestows on us the burning phrase
That rings at breakfast like a bugle-call ;
No Thomas loads the cables with his praise—
" The boys were splendid, charging down Whitehall."

Baser than loafers at the lowest Base,
We lose our pens and curse the telephone,
And do our duties, livened by the grace
Of Daphne, Laura, Rosalind and Joan.

My father's digging trenches on the coast,
My sister drives a car in Picardy,
My mother's cocoa is the canteen's boast,
But I do what's most suitable for me.

Give me a shorthand-typist and five clerks,
Whom I can work a nine-till-seven day,
Build me a brand-new office in the Parks,
And I will keep my country's foes at bay. . . .

He had got thus far, without too many erasures, sailing happily before a fair wind, and was wholly absorbed, when he felt two hands close tenderly over his eyes. Joan had entered unseen and was whispering affectionately in his ear :

" Silly, you old darling, don't you see that you can take me out to lunch now and it doesn't matter who sees us or what they say ? "

He rose, abandoning a promising piece of English verse, took his hat and stick and followed her into the corridor. There he tucked Joan's arm in his and marched her off proudly to the lift. Daphne Phyllis stood at the door of the clerks' room, looking after them with a cynical expression.

XXX

THE EPILOGUE

It would be a pity if any reader who has followed me so far through this story were to be left after so long a journey wondering what afterwards became of the characters in it. Let him believe that it has not been so long or so wearisome for him as for them. To please him, I will say what I can of the eventual fates of the chief among them.

Mr. Burnet, unfortunate man, was momentarily relieved by the decision of the Committee not to relieve him of his position, stand him on his head or reduce him to the rank of a boy clerk. But soon he realised that the Committee's favourable report had opened the way for Sir William Blood's most extravagant innovations; and life became very bitter to him. Sir James Bootle, who had always looked on him with kindliness as a man well fitted for carrying on the great departmental tradition, pitied him and determined to do something to alleviate his hard lot. When the next Honours List came due, he remembered Mr. Burnet's passionate aspiration to be a Companion of the Bath. He therefore called for the shorthand-typist whom he had recently installed—strange things occurred in the last twelve months of the war—and began to dictate to her as follows:

"I think the time has now come when some token of recognition should be given to the services of Mr.

Burnet, Assistant-Director of Circumvention." At this point, he was distracted by the odd behaviour of the pigeons on his window-sill and he walked across the room to observe them more closely. He found two or three of them evidently indisposed ; and he looked on the stricken birds with a sorrowful eye, correctly attributing their malady to the results of underfeeding. He turned back, shaking his head sadly. "I therefore put forward his name for the C.B. He——" Here one of the pigeons staggered and fell. Sir James hurried back to the window, feeling mechanically in his pocket for the crusts which twelve months before he had invariably carried. But this remedy was not forthcoming. He averted his gaze from the tragedy and resumed, "He is an able and hard-working official. . . ." The typist of course did her best ; but it was a pity that Sir James did not read through the minute before signing it. When they announced to Mr. Burnet that he had been awarded the C.B.E., it all but broke his heart. Let us say no more about him.

Mr. Harper, after he received his free pardon from the Committee, was severely buffeted by Sir William Blood and went to his corner with one eye closed and his second wind not yet in sight. But this trouble blew over as such troubles do ; and the full effect of Mrs. Hammond's efforts was delayed. Mr. Harper continued to labour and aspire and to lead the hygienic life. When meat disappeared and coupons were substituted, he rejoiced exceedingly and boasted to his friends. But when presently it was announced that ham could be obtained without a coupon, Mr. Harper, seduced by the prospect of obtaining something for nothing, ordered and ate a plateful. This seems to have opened a chink in his moral armour. From that day his energy and his plausibility declined: he lost his self-confidence and he lost the power of placating his superiors. When last heard of, he was in charge of the Registry at the Tramways Office and had taken to wearing a soft hat with a morning-coat.

Cyril and Joan were married in due course and, a few days after the Armistice was signed, they became —I have promised to conceal nothing—the parents of twins. This event afforded Mr. Evans immoderate amusement; and he seemed to connect it, by some process of thought peculiar to himself, with the fact that Cyril had always provided a certain element of comedy in official matters.

As for Mr. Evans, he continued to enjoy great prosperity and Sir Abraham Towle's full confidence. And he and Cyril worked together in amity and happiness, until the Terminator of Delights and the Sunderer of Companions, to wit, the decontrol of hairbrushes, separated their places of business but not their hearts.

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